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LOVE
BEYOND
DREAMS
PASSION
BEYOND
HONOR.

Obsession

KATHERINE HALE

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING NOVEL AFFINITY



With a single moss rose,
JARED STONER
gave LELIA
a dream of love.
But the Stoners
ruined her family,
her love, her self...
and Lelia
swore revenge.
HER PRINCE
MUST DIE.

But at Jared's touch,
her hatred
became a memory,
her love
a dream of ecstasy again.
And beneath
the flowering moss rose,
their hearts were one,
together
THROUGH ALL ETERNITY.

OBSESSION

From a distance, Lelia saw him. Jared Stoner. He was tall, very tall. A big man and powerfully built—a giant, or so it seemed to her eyes. Jet black hair and a handsome, haughty face. Dark eyes like the night, aquiline nose, and a full rich mouth. Lelia stared at him, transfixed by his beauty.

Turning, he sidestepped the group of youngsters. A sudden glimpse of Lelia's astonished, adoring face made him pause. Their eyes locked and her heart began to beat furiously. Starting to walk away, he changed his mind, and strolled over to her, an amused smile touching his lips.

At her side, he whispered, "Keep that look in your eyes and you'll hold a man's heart forever." He plucked a moss rose from his lapel, and tucked it into her bodice, then ran a hand through her golden hair.

She blinked back tears of joy, and he walked away, unexpectedly moved. Lelia stood bewitched. She sensed that this man's life and hers were to be star-crossed.

Jared Stoner replaced the handsome prince in Lelia's fantasies, and she lavished on him a wealth of tender love . . .

Obsession

KATHERINE C. HALE

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**Come to me in my dreams, and then
By day I shall be well again!
For then the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing of the day.**

**“Longing”
Matthew Arnold**

Prologue



I, ADAM JEFFREY, am a Devonshire man, and when I was much younger we had neighbors near us—the Savages. Their daughter was the most exquisite child I have ever seen. I used to watch her at play in the walled garden. Her hair was as golden as the sun high overhead. And I used to wonder what she would be like as a woman. Would she grow up, I asked myself fancifully, to become my beloved wife?

1.



SHE was born to great wealth and estate, but an evil star attended her birth, and within two decades Lelia Savage's fortunes were to tumble not once but many times.

Devon was the site of her origins. Her home, a great Restoration house called Wickford, was located near Westleigh, a few miles north of Bideford. For generations the West Country had nurtured her father's people: sailors, shipbuilders, and merchants. A Savage was with the fleet of ships which wrecked the Armada. Another ancestor, sailing with Richard Glenville on the *Revenge*, ambushed a Spanish treasure fleet off the Azores, and found himself one of only twenty dazed survivors after that fifteen-hour ordeal. A renegade Savage broke with the family to engage in the dangerous occupation of piracy. His reward? Hanged for his crimes and gibbeted. His tarred body decayed in chains, frightening little children as it swung back and forth in the wind. Not a whit deterred by this disgrace to their good name, the more sober Savages launched a thriving shipbuilding concern. Wherever a port stood open, a Savage vessel lay at anchor. On the home front Lelia's family both supplied wool to the local weavers, then exported the finished goods: serge and other cloth. Hard labor and canny business sense proved triumphant. A fine house was built on Bridgeland Street in Bideford, west of the Quay, and Savage became a name to be reckoned with in the world of commerce.

For nearly a hundred years the family waxed strong,

until the overseas trade thinned out. By the late eighteenth century, Savages were forced to look farther afield. Napoleon's excursions provided a lucrative source of income to the imaginative gambler, and Lelia's Devon relatives grew rich in the wars, while others less fortunate suffered death or bankruptcy. Fortunes made then were quadrupled in the industrial expansion. When Lelia's father, Nathaniel, came to manhood, the estate—holdings and income—was so large that he could lead a life of leisure if he so chose.

And that was his mistake. A gentleman didn't stoop to common toil, he thought, forgetting that none of his Savage ancestors had absented themselves a day from work. And when they no longer labored in warehouses or at their desks, a wealth of investments took up their time and energy. Gentlemen they may not have been by London standards—some of them were not even aboveboard—but they sent their sons to Oxford and married them well, built handsome houses, richly furnished, and acquired a refined manner, always keeping a hawk's eye on their earnings, as dear to them as their newborn sons.

Lelia's father was not trained for such diligence, nor had he the patience. As the youngest of three sons, he had been slated for the Civil Service, but a series of tragic events brought him his inheritance. Cholera felled the second boy, and a few years later both parents and the heir perished in a railway accident on the Continent. Thus, at twenty, Nathaniel Savage found himself an immensely rich orphan, the last of his line. As for the fortune, no one had ever stressed management before, and when the subject was broached to him by his solicitor, Nathaniel laughed and said, "It grows like a weed. I don't have to do a thing." Even more pleasurable was a trip to the Bank of England to confirm his large holdings. "Oh, I'm so rich!" he gloated. "Is it true? Is it really true?" he demanded of the scarlet-faced manager.

Overnight, Nathaniel Savage became a dashing man-about-town, abandoning his Oxford studies for a

dandy's existence. He settled into luxurious bachelor chambers in Mount Street, Mayfair, and kept a carriage and pair which vied in splendor with the noble vehicles gracing Hyde Park. All his attention was focused on the excitements of gambling, the Turf, and women. Liquor was not a preoccupation at that time, but cards obsessed him, and the demimonde quickly snapped him up. With his best friend, Tobias Stoner of Norfolk, he made the rounds of the elite bordellos and night houses, spending languorous hours with the demimondaines at Kate Hamilton's, the Argyll Rooms, or the Holborn Casino, London's fashionable dance hall. He installed a mistress in St. John's Wood. When he wasn't slumming, life was a constant round of parties, balls, the opera, the theatre, and such extravaganzas as Vauxhall Gardens and Cremorne. The close of the three-month London season found him traveling abroad, or revitalizing himself in Devon.

All in all, a pleasurable life, but gradually it bored him, and Nathaniel Savage, who was at heart a simple man, found himself longing for a wife and children—for a son to carry on his name.

In such a tender mood did he meet Daisy Neville at a dinner dance in Belgravia, the year of her coming out. It was one of those painful, poignant moments when each one knows the heart's desire has been found. Small, very blonde, with delicate features and a piquant expression, her bewitching grey-green eyes dealt Nathaniel a mortal blow. He fell headlong in love. And she with him. She waltzed him joyously into her life, her voluminous crinolines keeping him at arm's distance. And while she danced with other young swains, he lounged, moonstruck and distraught on the sidelines. Finally, breaking every rule of good etiquette, he barged in on a dance and took her away from her partner.

"And then—" Lelia's mother would twinkle with laughter at this point. "He hissed at me. Hissed! 'Where do you live? I must see you! You must tell me!'"

Of course, she had to tell him. With his lean, tall,

blond good looks, his dazzling smile and merry blue eyes, he was irresistible, outshining every man in the room. In a few choked words she gave him her address. Later, he buttonholed the hostess and, despite her sputters of protest, gleaned a few more nuggets of information about the ravishing apparition on the dance floor. His vision was the youngest of four daughters, whose father, a solicitor, numbered among his clients some of the most important families in the kingdom.

In the following days and weeks they kept meeting by accident at all the important social functions of that season. It was quite apparent to their friends, indeed, to any bystander, that the situation was very serious. At last came the inevitable invitation to visit the Neville house in Belgrave Square, which prompted a declaration of marriage from the desperate Nathaniel. And then poor Daisy had to undergo a very grueling session with her father.

Years later, she would tell a solemn Lelia: "Nat and the other guests had gone and Papa called me in. I stood there against the door, trembling in the cold—for he had let the fire die in the grate—afraid to face him." Her eyes opened in wonder, remembering.

"I don't trust him, Daisy," her father had said.

"Why not?"

"I just don't think he's reliable."

"Reliable!" She looked bewildered. "He has an immense fortune, a splendid estate, and he loves me." Her voice rose. "And I love him. What more do you want?"

"Well, his character is not without blemish—but that's of little consequence. He's assured me that those days are behind him, and I believe him on that score." Hesitating, he tried to find the right words. "I just don't know if he could handle a crisis."

"What crisis will we ever have?" Daisy asked simply.

The reply was very long in coming. At last he spoke. "I wish your mother were alive to help me in this decision. You're my favorite child, Daisy. It would kill me if you made a mistake."

"It's not a mistake, Papa," she whispered.

"Well, if it is, don't ever come to me for help. You won't get it."

And on that ominous note she won over his objections.

Having given his consent, Mr. Neville determined to do handsomely by his youngest daughter. He announced the engagement at a lavish supper dance, provided her with an elaborate trousseau, and gave the happy couple a very grand wedding at St. George's Church, Hanover Square.

It had rained the night before, washing away all the soot and dirt from the sky and streets. Pinkish brick shone through the grime encrusted on buildings, and the ordinarily thunderous traffic seemed muted. In the early morning hours the mist rolled back to reveal a brilliant spring sun, which cast a shimmering radiance on the city.

Daisy Neville thought it the most beautiful day she had ever seen.

A crowd of women and children watched as the red carpet was rolled down the steps of the church. Carriages began arriving and there was a flurry of silk and lace mingling with the black frock coats of the men. The exquisite bride appeared with her eight attendants, and for one moment was seen to clutch nervously at her father's arm. Hesitating, on the porch, she glanced above at the luminous sky. Nothing could mar such a day, and she stepped forward confidently to embrace her destiny. Flower petals rained down on the happy couple as they departed.

Honeymooning in Europe, Daisy and Nathaniel were as happy as any two young people in love could be. She was seventeen and he was twenty-eight: life with its bounty awaited them with open arms. Returning to England, not only had they the delightful responsibility of a vast estate, but they took out a long lease on a lovely Georgian townhouse in Portman Square. Like children playing with a doll's house, they stocked this London treasure with furniture, objets d'art, paintings,

books, and carpets, and then staffed it with servants. They gave dinners and soirées, and in return dined out frequently. They patronized every social and charitable event possible. During the season—May to July—they rode every afternoon in Rotten Row, dazzling the Hyde Park gawkers on their superb mounts or in their splendid equipage. In the winter a few weeks were spent at Richmond Hill, Tobias Stoner's estate in Norfolk, for the shooting. Daisy hated it. She found it tedious to be shut up with the ladies, waiting for the men to return from the field. She, the vivacious Kezia Stoner, and the other wives would indulge in endless games of whist and patience, in reading books, or in embroidery, until their husbands staggered back from the coverts with their bag of woodcock, almost too exhausted to lift a teacup or down a glass of sherry. A three-hour respite gave them strength to face the huge dinner, but for little else, and Daisy was always delighted to escape from gloomy East Anglia.

Then she and Nathaniel would go home—to Wickford. It was a captivating house. Daisy spent hours wandering around, exclaiming over every nook and cranny, muttering in awe over the hipped roof and dormers, the dramatic projecting wings, the charming eighteenth-century sash windows, and multiple chimney stacks. Best of all was the moat and the flowers spilling over protecting walls and bridges.

Once, to capture her attention while they were on the front lawn, Nathaniel gave her a resounding kiss.

With a breathless laugh, she cried: "Oh, Nat, it's the most perfect house. All higgledy-piggledy. Sometimes so impressive and the next moment a bit silly." And she rested peacefully in his arms.

In Wickford's ancient interior, Daisy launched a massive decorating scheme. Out went the old furniture: Queen Anne, Georgian, Sheraton, and Chippendale pieces were banished to the servants' quarters under the eaves. Walls were repapered and painted, new rugs laid down, heavy drapes hung up, and soon the house was filled with the massive, dark furniture that was all

the rage in London. Next, the gardens were attacked with similar vigor. Under Daisy's orders, beds of flowers were torn up and replanted, walks redesigned, terraces improved. She capped her efforts by building a secret garden for her expected child.

Looking at it one day when it was finished, she sighed. "How beautiful it is."

"For a boy?" Her husband looked dubious.

"Nat," she said softly. "It might be a girl."

"No!" he cried with a touch of vehemence. "No, Daisy, it will be a boy. I must have a son."

So grim was his face that for the first time in her marriage, she understood her father's concern. Again she tried to humor him. "If it's not a boy, the next one will be."

"It will be a boy. And I don't want to discuss it any more," he replied, marching back alone to the house.

That was the first thread snapping between them. Yet when she wept that night in terror of childbirth, he did everything to soothe away her fears.

"Babies are born constantly, sweetheart. You'll have no trouble." But she did. It was very bad. The child was a long time coming into the world, and poor Daisy, who'd had a remarkably easy pregnancy, found herself in the grip of something quite frightening and unexpected. But then this was an aspect of marriage—like marital relations—that was never discussed. It was her duty to bear children. To suffer and be silent.

At first she was terrified of dying. Then the pains became so excruciating that she no longer cared. Thoughts of Nathaniel were tinged with bitterness. At times she hated him. She did not understand how such sweet lovemaking could lead to such hell. Finally, the doctor, taking pity on her, dipped a wad of cotton into some chloroform, wrapped it in a handkerchief, and placed it over her nostrils. Within minutes, oblivion came.

Downstairs in the library, Nathaniel Savage sat in a stupor of anxiety. Demoralized by his wife's screams, and equally unprepared for this event, he sat drinking

brandy throughout the evening and on into the morning. At last he heard it—a thin mewling sound. Up the stairs he ran to their bedroom door, banging urgently, seeking admittance.

Out popped the midwife, wreathed in smiles.

"You have a lovely baby girl."

His flushed face drained of color. "No . . . no!" He shook his head emphatically. "It's a boy. It must be a boy."

She gave a gentle cluck. "No, sir. A bonny little girl."

"God damn it!" he cried, his voice echoing in the corridor. He left not a word for his wife. In punishment. Turning on his heel, he lurched down the stairs and tore through the house. He ran all the way down the path to the stables. In front of a group of startled grooms, he flung a saddle on his horse, then cantered off the estate, muttering a few incoherent words about Bideford.

His wife had been conscious during the scene at the door, and she lay now in bed, weeping. During an exhausted pause she summoned the midwife to her side.

"Show her to me," she whispered.

Swathed in a cotton blanket, its face red and wrinkled like an old man's, the baby was presented to her mother. It was not an encouraging sight for a nervous parent.

After a long, miserable look, she sighed. "Take her away."

"Will you be feeding her, ma'am?"

"Certainly not," came the tearful reply. "Get a wet nurse."

Thus did Lelia Savage enter the world in 1860, shattering her parents' happiness.

From witnesses on the road and in cottage gardens, Daisy learned that her husband had indeed gone to Bideford, and had soothed his gloom in every public house in town. Ending his rounds in a dockside pub, so melancholy and maudlin did he become at sight of the

ocean, thinking of his ancestors betrayed and heirless, that he engaged in a marathon game of faro and promptly lost several thousand pounds. Then he disappeared.

Three days went by without a word. Daisy became frantic. Bideford had been scoured to no avail, and the situation was becoming highly embarrassing. In desperation, she sent for Tobias Stoner, a man she secretly distrusted, but the only person who could help her in this delicate affair.

He came immediately and she dispatched him to Bideford. A sovereign did the trick: try Clovelly, he was told. Sliding down that steep cobbled street, cursing it in his anxiety, an angry Stoner finally found his drunken friend in a whore's bed. It took two days to sober him up and make him presentable.

A week after Lelia was born, Nathaniel Savage returned home to Wickford to make his apologies to his wife and greet his child. With Tobias Stoner at his side for support, he leaned weakly against the chaise longue, the picture of despair. Daisy lay on a mound of pillows, looking frail and lovely. And very hurt.

"I don't know what got into me, dearest. I must be a bit crazy . . ." He halted, overcome. Stoner gave him a nudge. "Forgive me."

She nodded distantly, her lips pursed.

A very long paused ensued, stretching out awkwardly, while they stared at one another in mutual dismay.

Finally breaking into their silence, Stoner exclaimed heartily: "Well, where is she? Where's the little Miss?"

Grateful to him, the young mother directed Nathaniel to call the nurse.

"Nothing to worry about, Daisy," Stoner said sotto voce. "He'll be all right now. You'll see."

Flustered to be caught *déshabillé*, she sank into the bedclothes, flashing him a charming, shy smile. What an extraordinary man! A big, handsome brute without a shred of sensitivity, or so she'd always judged him, and now here he was bending over backward to save

her marriage. Nathaniel was devoted to him, and if this was an example of his friendship, he was a rare man, indeed.

The infant was borne in on a pillow, immediately getting Tobias Stoner's attention. Striding over to the nurse, he peered into the small face.

"What a sweet little girl," he cried, sweeping her up in his strong arms and cuddling her against a broad shoulder. "Look at that little face. Like a flower, Nathaniel." With a laugh he turned to Daisy. "I'll wager ten pounds she'll be a beauty like her mother!" Ruffling the wispy black baby hair, he asked, "What are you going to call this child?"

Nathaniel looked ashamed, never once having considered a name.

"Lelia," said his wife in a clear voice.

"Lelia! Ah, that's a lovely name for a woman. She'll make some man very happy one day. Mark my words." A thought seized him. Strolling over to the father, he tapped him excitedly on the shoulder. "What better way to celebrate a friendship! Nat, let's give her to my boy."

The parents gaped at him in astonishment.

"Jared?" muttered Nathaniel.

"But, of course. We'll marry them!" Bending over the child's face, he cooed affectionately. "One look at her and he'll lose his heart." The remark sobered him. "He's my only son, Nat. We lost two others. You have to expect it. Babies are fragile creatures. Kezia and I just keep hoping for more." With a flourish, he held out the infant to its father.

"Take your little girl and love her. She'll be worth it."

Lelia had the good sense not to cry when her father took her in his arms. But he, leaning over her, dissolved in tears of remorse. Tobias Stoner slipped from the room, leaving the three of them alone together.

The following year Daisy Savage gave birth to a boy—stillborn. No wedge came between the couple, how-

ever. The tragedy drew them closer, Nathaniel having taken Stoner's words to heart. And for comfort they had Lelia. She was a pretty baby, now tow-headed and petite, the image of her lovely mother but for a pair of serious brown eyes.

To chase away grief, the old life was resumed: travels abroad, the exhausting London season, shooting in Norfolk, summer jaunts in Devon. It was all made pleasurable by Nathaniel's resolve not to gamble, and by a deepening friendship with Tobias and Kezia Stoner.

When Lelia was about three years old, her mother was brought to childbed again, and safely delivered of a healthy baby boy. Robert Charles Savage was a strong, handsome child doted on by his ecstatic parents. That they quite obviously preferred him to Lelia bothered her not at all. Even at that tender age, she knew that boys were more desired than girls, that a man must have sons, and she loved Robbie without jealousy.

Physically, he was blessed with every gift; mentally, he was extremely alert. He nursed avidly at his mother's breasts, was weaned without discomfort, crawled early, and walked in a day, astonishing everyone with his progress. And then when he was two, he developed temper tantrums. Overnight, he became a great problem. The doctor found nothing wrong, but in these spells the child was very difficult to handle. Confining him to his nursery didn't help; he simply broke everything in sight in a rage. Adults began avoiding him, even those who loved him very much. Only one person seemed capable of handling the situation: Lelia's old nurse, a sweet gentle soul, blessed with an instinct for children's woes. Plumping herself down in the rocker, she would seize the raging bundle and hold him tightly on her lap while he shrieked himself purple. But she sat there stolidly, as if deaf, until the piercing din turned into sniffs and sputters, and the little head huddled against her shoulder.

"He'll grow out of it," she told the alarmed parents. And he might have, if misfortune had not struck.

A tumble down the kitchen stairs wrenched the old woman's hip. When the pain grew so bad that she couldn't hide it in front of the children, their frightened queries drove her to Mrs. Savage to seek a discharge.

Tearfully, Daisy sent her back home to Plymouth, and looked about for a replacement. The London market was combed: one smart nurse after another arrived, but a week of Robbie's furies sent them packing. Finally, Daisy went to a hiring fair in desperation and brought home a Devon girl. At that point, sleepless and wretched, she would have taken anyone; but this woman was young and came with a good reference. The distraught mother thought she'd found a bargain.

Lelia didn't like the new nurse's shifty eyes and mean mouth. Fortunately, they seldom met. When his tantrums began, Lelia had been given Robbie's nurse in exchange for hers, so this stranger didn't enter her world except on those occasions when they were all forced together. Still, if the new nurse had an opportunity, she would pinch or slap Lelia for the slightest misbehavior. Once she locked the "naughty girl" in a dark closet for several hours when her own nurse was ill. So great was Lelia's terror that she fainted. Coming to, finding herself alone in the dark, and knowing that the unkind wretch would further mistreat her if she gave way to hysteria, she stifled her sobs and lay whimpering on the floor. Luckily, her release coincided with one of Robbie's tantrums, and she fled to her room unmolested. It fascinated Lelia how the new nurse always got him to shut up—even faster than Nanny. She certainly had a gift for keeping him quiet, the child thought.

Robbie had changed, though. He was not as active as he used to be—in fact, he was lethargic, sometimes almost stupefied. His eyes looked odd. His bright, endearing little face was a strange, pasty color. But the adults were happy. He was quiet. Who was Lelia, a child, to question this?

One day they were all gathered together, having tea in the day nursery. Eating a bit of bread and butter,

Lelia dabbled a morsel of cake in some jam, noticing that Robbie ate nothing and sat staring dumbly at his plate. Bad children won't eat? Swish! All the plates were dumped on a tray, and the nurses left the room with rustling petticoats, presumably to take more tea downstairs with the staff in the kitchen.

Jumping up, Lelia ran to Robbie and gave him a hug. "Do you want to play?" she asked.

He shook his head, and then did a very strange thing. Sitting down on the floor, he leaned his head against the wall and went to sleep. How odd, Lelia thought. Perhaps that early morning screaming bout had exhausted him. She skipped off to her room.

Solitary play, if one is not in the mood, can be boring, and Lelia wandered restlessly back to her brother. Robbie had toppled over onto his side, looking like an abandoned rag doll, his blond curls damp and limp on his forehead, spittle dribbling out of his mouth.

That sent her flying to her mother. They'd be having tea downstairs. In a rush, and terrified lest she bump into that new nurse, Lelia ran for the main staircase. Down, down, down her shoes pattered on the wood, and on down the corridor with a peep into every room before she finally found them.

"Robbie's sick!" she gasped.

Never had she seen two people move as quickly as those two did. Breathlessly, she trailed after them. When they reached the nursery, Robbie was lying on his back.

Nathaniel began to sob. Through her teeth, Daisy said, "Get a doctor, damn it!"

Wiping his eyes, he tore out of the room, and Lelia went to her mother, who sat cradling her son.

"Nurse—"

"Yes, Lelia? What about Nurse?" Her voice was astonishingly clear.

"She gives him medicine from a bottle."

Daisy's eyes grew cold and hard, like an animal's. "Where does she keep it, darling? Tell me."

Faltering, the child pointed toward his night nursery. "In there, I . . . I think—"

Steering her daughter into the room, Daisy prodded her with soft, incessant questions. "Where is it, darling? Help me find it . . . Where is it, please?"

The bottle was still standing on a window ledge. It was Godfrey's Cordial.

"Oh, God, no!" Daisy whispered, sitting down limply. Lelia remained fearfully by her side, for some curious reason allowed to stay, not understanding that she kept her mother from breaking. That it was human warmth Daisy needed, not the dead weight in her arms.

On the doctor's arrival, Daisy surrendered her child without protest. A long, long time went by. Thin, sickly rays of sun wandered into the room, faintly illuminating the cot and the figure bent over it. Robbie's parents sat mute, apart from each other, their faces locked in anguish. Lelia fiddled with her sash, winding and unwinding it, listening to the loud ticking of the nursery clock. At last came the announcement.

"I'm sorry, there's nothing more I can do. He's dead."

"We thought the nurse had a knack . . . of keeping him quiet—" With a trembling hand, Daisy held out the bottle.

Giving it a cursory look, he said vehemently, "Yes, yes, she kept him quiet all right. Permanently quiet!" He swore under his breath. "The rotten stuff ought not to be sold. It's laced with opium. Kills little children every year." He glanced at the parents. The man was sobbing convulsively in a corner, but the woman sat dry-eyed, her body rigid.

"Shall I call the police?" he asked gently.

"No!" gasped the father.

The mother's voice rose over his, thin and dry. "Yes! Yes, by all means. Call them. Right away." As her husband tugged at her sleeve in a feeble objection, she turned to him bitterly. "Nat, I will not have any other child die by this woman's hand. She must be prosecuted."

He stumbled aimlessly about the small room. "I can't face a trial."

"Well, you may not be able to, but I can and I will. To see justice done." She was on her feet now, her face flushed with outrage.

Lelia had never seen them quarrel before, and that fact, on top of Robbie's death, made her crumple in tears. Nathaniel, with a reproachful glance at his wife, bundled her out of the room.

Robbie's funeral was brief and sad. He was buried with other members of the Savage family in Westleigh, on a lovely grassy slope overlooking the Torridge River. Immediately afterward, Nathaniel left for London, leaving Daisy behind to cope with reality. Ruthlessly, she walked about the house and gardens getting rid of every vestige of her son. His room was locked up; all his clothes and toys were packed away and sent up to the attics; and his little dog was destroyed. Watching her, Lelia thought her cold and hard-hearted. Years later, she realized it was the only way her mother could live through the worst months of her life.

Adults gossip over children's heads, and from these conversations and others heard drifting up the backstairs, Lelia learned that the awful nurse had been brought to trial and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. Her mother was a heroine to the staff for going down to the Assizes and testifying without a husband's comfort. He was too busy gambling in London, it was muttered.

The trial lasted two days, but it was almost three weeks before Daisy Savage came home again, looking thin and haggard. But her smile was gay. Sweeping into the nursery, she chattered about this and that. As soon as Lelia was settled, she was joining her husband in London, she babbled. Then they were off to the Continent with the Stoners.

Dragging Lelia off to her boudoir, Daisy dabbed perfume on her small ears and took a large gulp of champagne. "And I'll give him another son," she said,

staring fixedly into the glass. Again, came the ravishing smile.

The next five years were good ones. Outwardly, Lelia's parents appeared not only happy, but still in love. Leaving her behind in Devon with a nurse and full staff, they took up residence in the London town-house, and often traveled abroad with the Stoners. That was a name Lelia was beginning to know as well as her own. Kezia and Tobias Stoner were her godparents. Regal, handsome, domineering—their dazzling presence fascinated her. As with royalty, a gracious hand would be extended: one took it and curtsied and was dismissed. The two men were inseparable, and how often she'd seen Mrs. Stoner's elegant head and long, white neck stretching toward her mother. Lelia heard fragments of talk about money, society doings, travel, gossip . . . Jared. Jared was their son, Lelia guessed. Spinning a glorious career for himself at Cambridge.

The time not devoted to London or to traveling was spent with Lelia in Devon: Christmas, her birthday, and all of August when they toured the coast, either the home county or Cornwall. Those were wonderful times: her mother radiant and bubbling over with high spirits, and her father kind and gentle.

When her parents left she was lonely, desperately so, though that was a secret she kept to herself. Materially, she had an idyllic childhood, lacking nothing. Certainly, she was blessed with more dolls than the royal princesses. Leather, wooden and rag dolls; tiny fey creations called Frozen Charlottes; painted Dutch dolls; and the magnificent bisque, china, and French Bru dolls who cried or said "Mama" and "Papa," whose eyes opened and shut, and whose gowns outshone many an adult beauty's. One year Lelia was given a Parisienne lady of fashion doll, dressed in an elaborate ball gown and drop earrings, whose crowning glory was her shaded eyelids. Accompanying her was a trunkful of clothes—undergarments, dainty dresses, shoes, gloves,

handkerchiefs, jewels, furs, hats—enough for a dozen dolls. A year later this doll was eclipsed (in size) by a gigantic German doll, swathed in a velvet and ermine-trimmed coat and hat. Poor Daisy would have been mortified to learn that her child's favorite was a shabby London rag baby doll, which Lelia clutched until its little muslin-wax face grew shapeless with affection.

Suitable toys for a girl crammed the nursery, and the shelves were stocked with books both entertaining and pious. One Christmas, under a mountainous tree a-quiver with shimmering candles and glittering balls, stood a dollhouse rising in tiers like a wedding cake. Tiny lights flickered on the richly garbed, porcelain-faced family and on their beautiful possessions. As a house, it almost outdid Wickford. Lelia thought it lovely, but overwhelming, much preferring the ornate Christmas dinner because it marked the first time she had ever dined with her parents rather than in the nursery. The long table was covered with a creamy white cloth and lined with dishes. Candles flickered in the wall sconces and in heavy candelabra. Dazed by the gleam of silverware and crystal, surrounded by relatives and Devon friends, the child sat intoxicated by this view of adult life. Finally came the *pièce de résistance*—a plum pudding with its evergreen sprig of holly, burning brightly.

Lelia was growing up. A governess replaced the nurse. Lelia detested the woman until she learned her mettle. Mary Quigley, a clergyman's plain daughter, eldest of seven children, with no dowry and scanty prospects of attracting a mate, came to her new charge convinced that Lelia was another of those scatter-brained young girls capable of absorbing no more education than the meager rudiments permitted to her sex: a smattering of French; singing and study of the piano-forte; drawing in several styles; geography, map making, arithmetic; and fancy work. Miss Quigley was bored and distracted, and her whiplash tongue unnerved Lelia. But at the first sign of rebellion, prickly holly would be

clamped round her neck to improve her posture and temper.

One day, in a burst of despair, the girl cried out, "I want to learn! Not this foolish stuff. Help me!"

No prank, this. The girl was in earnest. Unbending, Miss Quigley introduced her to the wonders of her parents' vast library, and in a mutual love for books they eventually became devoted friends. Yet, always, Lelia was gently handled, never overwhelmed with intellectual discussions. Her mind and emotions were to be kept innocent, receptive, and obedient to that man who would one day claim her for his wife.

Occasionally, Lelia widened her perspective with a furtive visit to the servants' quarters. Awaiting her naïveté was a wealth of tabloids and penny dreadfuls. Murder, rape, torture—an Aladdin's cave of horrors opened up. Not all of it she understood; that would come with time.

They made explorations in the pony-chaise. With Lelia at the reins, they braved the muddy ruts with shrieks of laughter. Up and down, through green coves and enchanting hamlets, they waved to cottagers in their magical gardens. Swooping into deep valleys and twisting byways drenched with the smell of red earth and fuchsia hedges, they bolted down the road for the day's destination.

Clovelly was Lelia's favorite village. Leaving the pony at the top of the cliffs, they would scamper down the single cobbled street, which stretched a good half mile to the bay. Ancient gabled cottages with doors ajar lined the narrow path, flowers and creepers growing up their walls. And wild fuchsia sprouted everywhere—in gardens, hanging baskets, and window boxes. Donkeys clip-clopped past them lugging panniers. Suddenly, they would reach the harbor with its small cluster of fishing boats. A brilliant sky, a vivid blue sea, and bayside cliffs the color of soft red sandstone. Lelia thought it bewitching.

But her great joy was to walk in the gardens at Wickford. Every day, she spent an hour alone, and in good

weather she was allowed outdoors. Avoiding the ornate Italian garden she would dash across one of the three stone bridges spanning the moat, and hurry to the serpentine path which dipped into the great sweep of the park. A bend here and there disclosed a small classical temple or a folly concocted by some romantic ancestor. Sometimes she dallied—usually not. Past the lake she flew, then ran through the gate to the secret garden, which was bounded on all sides by a grey, fifteenth-century buttressed wall, overgrown with moss and flowery creepers.

Built by her mother, seemingly without plan, it was a child's delight. Roses shot up everywhere; tall hollyhocks reached to the tops of the walls; daffodils, iris, and hyacinth grew in wild profusion; and the little flowers—pansies, crocuses, primroses, and violets—twinkled like rare jewels in every bed. Flowering trees drooped over the graveled path.

Day after day Lelia sat in this captivating place, spinning fantasies about a handsome prince who would seek her hand in marriage. Together, they would dwell in wedded bliss and perfect contentment forever and ever. . . .

When she was ten years old she met that prince.

Jared Stoner. It was a name she'd heard all her life—only son and heir to her godparents. He had not only been called to the Bar but was engaged to marry an earl's daughter, and a celebration was to be held in his honor. Lelia and her parents, along with many others, made the trek up to Norfolk. All memories of that trip were eclipsed by her first sight of the house. Richmond Hill—how beautiful it was! Wickford looked very ordinary in comparison. The great house was approached by a long, uphill sweep of drive bordered with ancient oak trees. Glowing red brick, sunlight reflecting in a thousand leaded panes, and an elaborately pinnacled frontage transformed a Tudor mansion into a palace. Even Coleridge might have sought inspiration here. Never had Lelia seen so many wondrous objects—the most costly furnishings and fabrics, exquisite paintings,

china, and crystal. It made her heart ache. But something else set it on fire.

Standing out on the terraced lawn, among a flock of somber-hued governesses, nannies, and brightly dressed children, Lelia stood toward the back with Mary Quigley. Irritated at the delay—the smell of roast oxen and the anticipation of fireworks had everyone on edge—she longed for the festivities to begin. From a great distance, she saw a man passing from group to group. A few pleasantries spoken, a hand kissed, a flash of a brilliant smile, and then he moved on. Steadily, he came in their direction. Fascinated, Lelia inched away from Miss Quigley, and began pushing herself to the front of the group. An annoyed girl shoved her aside, and she found herself standing apart from the others, waiting for him. For now she knew who it was. Jared Stoner. He was tall, very tall. A big man and powerfully built—a giant, or so it seemed to her eyes. Jet black hair and a handsome, haughty face. Dark eyes like the night, aquiline nose, and a full, rich mouth. Lelia stared at him, transfixed by his beauty. A fallen archangel, she thought.

Turning from the last group of well-wishers, he side-stepped the group of youngsters. A sudden glimpse of Lelia's astonished, adoring young face made him pause. Their eyes locked and her heart began to beat furiously. Starting to walk away, he changed his mind, and strolled over to her, an amused smile touching his lips.

At her side, he whispered, "Keep that look in your eyes, little one, and you'll hold a man's heart forever." He plucked a moss rose from his lapel, and tucked it into her bodice, then ran a hand through her golden hair.

She blinked back tears of joy, and he turned away, unexpectedly moved. Adam Jeffrey called to him, and hastily, he joined his friend. Behind him, Lelia stood bewitched. Not even Mary Quigley's hiss of annoyance penetrated her ear. Perhaps she sensed that this man's life and hers were to be star-crossed.

Jared Stoner replaced the handsome prince in her

fantasies, and she lavished on him a wealth of tender love. As she grew older, his face faded from memory until only an impression remained, like a faint scent lingering over dead flowers. A phrase of music, a picture could bring it back again into focus in unguarded moments. No one knew her secret. Her parents would have laughed, and her fastidious mother would have been greatly displeased. Lelia knew her well enough to know that she found such a man distasteful. Much too crude for her tastes. Too obvious. Too animal. Behind that elegant exterior lurked a wild restlessness upsetting to a woman, but the child saw him as gentle and tender.

Lelia's lovely, sheltered world began to crumble. Friends seemed to evaporate, the townhouse was sold, and all traveling ceased. Nathaniel Savage still spent much time in London, but his wife lived exclusively at Wickford, at times isolating herself for days in her suite, until she would appear in a rush of gaiety to join her daughter. At first enthralled by her high spirits, Lelia soon grew terrified as she realized her mother was on the brink of hysteria. Only champagne had a calming effect on Daisy's overwrought nerves, and a bottle stood constantly at her side. Other occasions found her lethargic. She spent hours staring out the window with a chilling, remote expression, weeping soundless tears. And in the dead of night Lelia would often hear an awful high wailing that she first thought the cry of an animal.

When Nathaniel returned, her parents would seem genuinely happy for a day or so, and then the quarrels would recommence: at first behind closed doors, later, growing more violent, in front of Lelia or the servants. They quarreled always about money and his excessive gambling. And dead sons . . . and something else that had happened between them. You don't touch me anymore, she said. And he said nothing.

One day Lelia overheard them talking in the Italian garden. Miss Quigley had retired with a migraine, and

her charge was reading in the schoolroom. Through an open window came the sound of her mother's anguished voice.

"Nat, you must tell me how much you owe!"

A long pause enabled Lelia to reach the window. They were walking up and down a path, her mother's lovely skirt trailing in bedraggled fashion on the ground, hair blowing askew in the wind. Her face looked flushed and unhealthy. Her father appeared tired and out of sorts.

"Well, you know most of it," he muttered.

"I must know all of it!"

He turned away, and she clutched his arm fearfully.

"Well, I owe eighty thousand pounds to Tobias."

"Oh, my God!" Her voice rose in a cry of sorrow.

"Daisy, he's not going to call for it. He promised me—a gentleman's agreement. He's my oldest friend. He's not going to turn on me."

"Why? Why didn't you stop gambling when I begged you? You'd already lost a fortune to him."

"You know I can't control it."

"But he wins too much. He never loses." She erupted into shrill laughter. "Damn him! A man that lucky—I think he cheats."

"Sweetheart, he's giving me a loan to help me over this patch. Next year it'll be better."

She faced him, hands on hips. "Why didn't you pursue that marriage contract with Tobias?"

He looked bewildered. "Between Jared and Lelia! It was a jest, Daisy. No one took it seriously—we knew so at the time. And you dislike young Stoner," he added irritably. "Would you have your daughter married to him?"

"No, not that bedhopper. But the house . . . so much money—" She gave a long sigh. "Had she been engaged to him, we wouldn't be in this strait. He'd hardly short-change a prospective relative."

"Next year will be better," he repeated tonelessly.

"Did you never once think of Lelia? Have you looked at her lately?"

For the first time he smiled. "Yes, she's a lovely child."

"She's not a child," she snapped. "Look at her closely. She's developing into a lovely young girl. Soon she'll be a woman. We must start looking for a husband. And that, my friend, means a dowry."

"Well, she'll get something."

"How much?" Her tone grew strident.

"Enough." He shrugged. "For heaven's sake, Daisy, that's years away."

"We can plan, Nat. And save. A girl that lovely will make a splendid match if she has a sufficient dowry." She gave him a sideways look. "What about Adam Jeffrey?"

"For God's sake! You must be out of your mind. Every woman in the county is dangling her daughter in front of that poor young man. It's enough to sour anyone on marriage."

"Rubbish," she coolly replied. "He fell in love with a girl who jilted him for a title. I think he'll take a long time recovering. And then he'll meet Lelia."

"You're crazy."

"It gives me something to hope for . . ." Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she continued, "Put the money aside now, Nat, so that it's safe for her."

He didn't answer, but stood staring at the ground.

"Please . . . please, darling."

Speaking in a tight voice, he clenched his hands. "I don't have it, Daisy."

She jerked him around, eyes wide with fear. "Not have it? Where is it?"

"It's gone. There's not much left."

With a low moan she backed away, stumbling as she ran toward the house. At the window, Lelia turned away, heartsick.

The life of deception began: playing cat and mouse with tradesmen, dodging creditors, and avoiding inquisitive neighbors. An agent was found in London and Nathaniel Savage began shipping him prize possessions,

but the money gained was dissipated at the gambling tables. Other adjustments were made: the stable of horses was reduced; servants were dismissed; champagne gave way to sherry and finally to gin; Lelia wore hand-me-downs from her mother. More and more Daisy kept to her darkened suite, never available to the few visitors who called. Mary Quigley, solicitous of Lelia's interests, tried to hide her alarm, but the girl herself was frightened. Her father never came home any more, and she would encounter her mother in odd nooks and disused rooms of the house, fighting her private demons. An underlying rage was replacing the customary good humor; the enchanting smile turned too often into a snarl. Drifting through Wickford like a sickly ghost, Daisy brooded for hours in a solitary corner or talked to herself in a rapid monotone. A touch awakened no response.

Sitting near her during one of these eerie sessions, Lelia saw her mother's eyes begin to blink rapidly.

"Who are you?" she asked thickly, giving her a suspicious glare.

Lelia tried to hide her shock. "I'm your daughter."

"We were so happy . . . so happy. I don't know what happened." Tears rolled down the emaciated cheeks. "He's never forgiven me for your brother's death. Says I neglected Robbie. It would have made all the difference had he lived . . ." Then a smile darted across her features and she gave the girl a long look. "Well, we'll work on you. You're my hope, darling. I'll do right by you." She gave her hand an affectionate squeeze. "I have my jewels in London, and that will be your dowry. We'll start working on it right away."

Staggering to her feet, she clung to her daughter for support. "Just one thing, Lelia, to remember. Don't fall in love—ever. Make the man fall in love with you. That way your heart won't be broken."

Lelia's fourteenth birthday was a quiet affair: a volume of Shakespeare from Mary Quigley, some dresses from her mother, and nothing from her father except

a jumbled note expressing his love. A second was enclosed for his wife—a scrawl on cheap paper, words streaked and blurred. Under the mistaken impression that it was for her, Lelia read it.

Dearest love—I can never make up for the hurt I have caused you, but I am *infected*, sweet. Forgive me. I love you.

Nathaniel

One day Lelia would understand that pathetic message. Now, fearing that its disturbing contents would plunge her mother into even deeper melancholy, she destroyed it.

Mother and daughter had one last perfect day together. Adam Jeffrey had been invited for tea. Daisy spent days in excited preparation. Not a drop of liquor did she touch. For Lelia's sake, she was determined to make a good impression on him. The best rooms were aired, rearranged, and spotlessly cleaned. Any telltale marks on a wall, indicating a missing painting, were hidden by other pictures fished from obscurity. Knick-knacks were retrieved from dark corners, and suddenly that part of the house was its old delightful self—overcrowded but warm. A fire burned in each fireplace, to ward off an early spring chill.

Dressed in her prettiest teagown, vivacious and charming, Daisy came to supervise her daughter's toilette, bringing along her maid. Lelia's long blonde hair was tied back simply with a ribbon, so that it cascaded to her waist. But the dress was startling for a girl her age. One of her mother's remade gowns, it fell not quite to the floor, allowing a provocative glimpse of ankle. The bodice was much too tight, causing Lelia acute embarrassment. And even in her innocence, she sensed that the studied effect of child-woman was distracting, blatant. She pitied Adam Jeffrey who had eluded matchmaking schemes and mothers' wiles, but now

faced yet another snare. But her mother's radiance made the fraud worthwhile.

The tea went surprisingly well. Having known his parents years before he was orphaned, Daisy kept him alone a few moments to renew old memories, delaying Lelia's entrance until with a wave of her hand, she summoned her into the drawing room and introduced them, laughing.

From his expression Lelia was not what he'd been anticipating. But, making a quick recovery, he rose to greet her. He was tall, handsome with comely features and grey eyes, elegantly dressed, his blond hair touched with grey. Fortune aside, it was obvious why everyone wanted him for a son-in-law. He took her hand as she curtsied.

Then Lelia saw something she'd never before seen in any man's eyes. For a brief second, he glanced at her full bodice and the skirt swelling over her hips. His mouth tensed. A strange, dark look crept into his eyes. At her blush it vanished, and he gently pressed her hand, smiling at the mother.

"Mrs. Savage, you have a beautiful daughter."

Daisy beamed and patted the couch, indicating that he should sit beside her. Lelia joined them for a sumptuous tea—the kind they used to have daily but now had only on festive occasions. Her mother was witty and amusing, and Mr. Jeffrey told entertaining tales of the hazards of traveling abroad. Lelia ran through a bit of her repertoire on the piano, and when he finally left, after staying quite a while, her mother called the visit a triumph.

Hugging Lelia, she cried happily, "What do you think of him?"

"Nice enough."

Daisy gave a pretty pout. "Oh, sweetheart! Do you know what he thought of you?"

A flush of color touched the girl's cheeks.

"Exactly, Lelia! He finds you beautiful, and I think you stirred him more than anyone he's met in a long while." Biting her lips, she added with a trace of ner-

vousness, "I'm sorry about the dress, darling. But I had to do it. You've heard and seen so much—" A tear rolled down her face. "Things no young girl should know. Our distressing predicament has forced my hand. I knew that if I could once get Jeffrey here he would be attracted to you." Anger vied with chagrin. "I never thought to use my daughter so . . ." A smile replaced the somber mood. "He's off to Europe, Lelia, for a year or so to get over a broken love affair. Then you just watch—he'll be back for you."

An image of Jared Stoner suddenly filled Lelia's mind with such clarity, it left her breathless. How would he look at me? she wondered.

"Mark my words, darling, Adam Jeffrey's the man you'll marry."

But while they sat at tea that day, Lelia's father, in great despair, died in London. 'A heart attack,' said *The Times* discreetly; 'died under mysterious circumstances,' wrote *The Morning Chronicle*. It was left to the more sensational dailies to print the truth: Nathaniel Savage had put a bullet through his brain in a West End brothel, dying in an ambulance enroute to a hospital.

His wife and daughter learned the news late that evening when the family solicitor presented himself. Daisy sat rigid, her face a stony mask. Lelia wept softly into a handkerchief.

The widow spoke. "Did he ask for me?"

"No, I'm sorry. All he said was 'Stoner.'" Mr. Barkus looked nonplused.

"Why? Why did he do it?"

"Well, it appears that Mr. Stoner called his promissory note due."

Daisy blinked. "And did he pay it?"

"Against my advice, yes."

"I thought he didn't have that much money."

"A note was left for me, Mrs. Savage," he sighed. "Your husband sold your jewels in repayment."

Fear stole into her face. "Is anything left?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. That's why I came down to warn you . . ."

"Say it! Say it!" She lashed out in fury.

"I'm afraid he died a bankrupt."

"And Wickford?" Her voice sounded thin and far-away.

"It and the contents of this house," he said heavily, "will have to be put up for auction."

"How long do I have?"

"Two—three weeks." He looked as unhappy as the bereaved pair. "Do you have somewhere to go?"

"Oh, yes, don't worry about me!" A brittle laugh shook her body. "What do they say in London? That Stoner ruined him?"

The lawyer hesitated. "Some see it that way, ma'am."

"Tobias Stoner . . ." Throwing back her head, she peered at her visitor through half-closed eyes. "I always thought Richmond Hill too great an extravagance for such a common man. Farmer's people, they were." She sneered. "Tell me, did my jewels go to pay his gambling expenses, or were they used for Richmond Hill?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I would suspect the latter. Mr. Stoner has a reputation for not losing."

"Yes, I know," she answered thoughtfully. "And the son . . . what of him?"

"Said to be less lucky with cards."

"Tobias Stoner cheats," she replied, in so cold a voice it froze Lelia's blood. "I'll get him . . . one of these days," and her smile was brilliant . . .

Two days later, Nathaniel Savage was laid to rest beside his little sons in the churchyard at Westleigh. Still and aloof stood his widow in her ugly widow's weeds, dry-eyed behind the thick veil, clinging to her daughter with fierce intensity. Lelia broke down utterly.

In the early afternoon, Daisy found her still weeping in the secret garden.

"I don't want to see you ever . . . ever crying again," the mother said in a chilly voice. She slapped her across the face, so hard that the girl reeled. "Now listen to me, Lelia, and listen well. We have a lot to do in the next few days, and I need your help, not your tears."

Lelia stared at her in shock. The flecks of green had gone from Daisy's eyes, leaving them an icy grey.

"We have about a week before the assessors come. Quigley is going with us to London, and each night both of you will help me pack. We can put small valuables in the false bottom of a trunk and sell them as needed. We won't be able to take much, but it'll keep us going for a few years, and—" She mumbled into Lelia's ear. "I still have a small cache of jewels here." Now her smile was tender, asking for forgiveness. "Enough, perhaps, for your dowry." They embraced convulsively. "I'm sorry, pet, but I can't have a weepy girl on my hands. Tears betray one, Lelia. They show how you feel. Remember that."

"I still don't understand," her daughter muttered, torn with misery.

"What?"

"About Tobias Stoner . . ."

A look of hatred shot across Daisy's features. "He encouraged your father to gamble . . . and other things. Anything else?"

Everyone was talking about it, gossiping, whispering behind her back. And those wretched newspaper stories. She had to know.

"What is a brothel?"

Daisy's pretty face crumpled, and for the first time her child saw fine lines etched about her eyes, twisting about her mouth. Suddenly, she looked much older than her thirty-two years, and deeply grieved.

"I don't know why he did that," she spoke almost inaudibly. "He knew how much I loved him. Why then would he go to other women?" Her voice rose to an anguished cry. Lelia, still not comprehending—the intimate relations between a man and a woman were not considered a fit subject for a young girl's edification—helped her mother back to Wickford, and held her hand while she drank a wine glass of gin, and then a second.

At the end of a week's grace, the creditors arrived, snapping and clawing for reimbursement—some com-

ing from as faraway as London. Assessors swarmed over Wickford. All Lelia's beautiful dolls and toys and the exquisite dollhouse were tagged. Even Robbie's sad little assortment of belongings was given a number. Nothing was overlooked. And among the many Devon friends and acquaintances, not one called to offer help or condolences in those unhappy days. The Savages had ceased to exist.

Just before their departure, Lelia said goodbye to her secret garden forever and picked a moss rose in memory of her dead prince.

2.



THEIR grueling train journey ended amid the bustle and the cast-iron glory of Paddington Station. Daisy's sister, Marie, met them. A quiet, capable woman, with none of Daisy's beauty, she took one look at the bedraggled group, promptly installed Miss Quigley and the luggage in a hackney coach, then packed her relatives into a growler. Off they darted into London. Lelia, knowing it with a child's eyes, now awoke to it as a young woman and found it enthralling. Nothing oppressed her—neither the dirt and stench in the streets, nor the incredible roar of traffic, nor the extraordinary contrast between rich and poor, so glaringly apparent among the jostling crowds. The sun was beginning to set, and great streaks of red broke through a misty sky setting buildings and trees on fire.

At Edgware Road, their driver headed into Marylebone, and then turned right into Gloucester Place.

Daisy sighed, exuding a faint odor of juniper berries. "Did you have to put us so close to Portman Square?"

Marie patted her knee. "Not that many flats are available, Daisy. You have to take what you can get. It's a nice house and a respectable couple." She beamed at Lelia. "Mr. Compton works in the City, but they need a little extra to keep going."

"I'm really grateful to you, Marie, for what you've done . . ." Daisy's voice trembled. "When will father see me?"

"Not just yet, dear," she replied, throwing Lelia a look of concern. "Edith and I are working on it every day. Don't worry, lamb, he'll come round."

A relieved sigh heralded their destination—a Georgian townhouse identical in style to all the row houses in that block. Only the polished mahogany door, the fanlight's design, and the lion-headed knocker singled it out from its neighbors. Whatever elegance and character it might once have possessed had been subdued under layers of soot. But the brass doorsill twinkled cheerily in the fading light, and the front hall, with a highly polished hardwood floor and a spiral staircase, appeared charming by gaslight. The landlord and his wife, Paul and Helen Compton, escorted their new tenants to the second floor.

The flat wasn't bad, though the high ceilings were flaking, the walls grimy with dirt, and the furniture in urgent need of an upholsterer. Grimly silent, Daisy went very pale. Obviously, they'd just have to make do. She took the two front rooms: a parlor overlooking the street, and a tiny bedroom. Mary Quigley and Lelia shared a room in back, its window overlooking a scruffy garden. Below them, the Comptons had two floors and a basement kitchen. A small staff of servants froze or perspired in the attic bedrooms as the season demanded. Laundry, housekeeping services, and meals were provided.

"All in all a good arrangement!" said Aunt Marie, brightly, as she left.

With a weak smile, Daisy crept into her minute bedroom and shut the door firmly.

A routine was quickly established: lessons in the

morning, excursions in the afternoon. At first, Daisy joined them on these outings, but soon the plethora of goods and materials crowding the stores, the rich clothing of the women, and the magnificence of the West End houses oppressed her spirits. Overcome by memories, she would slip back to her darkened bedroom for the blessed oblivion found in a gin bottle.

Toward the end of the season, she made a supreme effort on Lelia's behalf. Abstaining from liquor for several days, she laid out a battle plan worthy of a general. Miss Quigley was given the afternoon off, and Daisy, like a child with a doll, fussed over Lelia's hair and dressed her in her simplest frock, happily chortling, "We're going to see grandfather, darling."

The girl looked surprised. "Has he sent for you?"

"No, but I think he's waiting for me—to make peace with him. I'm afraid he never approved of your father," she said apologizing. "But when he sees you, pet, he can't possibly hold anything against me anymore."

Lelia, with deep misgivings, had no heart to disagree in the face of such delight and confidence.

Daisy hired a hansom cab for the trip to Belgrave Square, and with a gay jingle of harness bells, they set off to be restored to the bosom of their family.

After ringing the bell of the great Georgian house that was Daisy's childhood home and sending in her card, they waited on the front step for many minutes. The butler broke their nervous reverie.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, the master is not at home."

"Away?" she asked slowly, eyes to the ground.

He made a slip. "No, ma'am, he's not at home."

With an angry movement, she pushed past him into the vast hall, dragging Lelia along behind her. She flew to a closed door on the left side of the vestibule.

"Daddy?" She knocked gently. Behind her, the butler in low tones pleaded with Lelia to go.

The silence of the place was unnerving. It was like a mausoleum.

"Daddy?" The knock was harder, more insistent.

Her father flung open the door. For a moment they

stared at one another: she, with a hopeful smile; he, with a look of bitter anger.

"I never want to see you again, Daisy—ever." And he slammed the door in her face.

"Father! Father!" Like a bereft child, she began screaming for him, beating on the door, tears running down her cheeks.

Her cries brought Aunt Marie hurrying down the staircase. With Lelia's help, they dragged her away from the door.

"Daisy! Daisy!" Marie cried. "Why did you come? Why?"

"I thought it would be all right," her sister moaned. "God, can he never forgive me?"

"He loathed Nathaniel. You must have known that."

"I wanted to show him our child. How could he turn away my beautiful child?"

"He can't forgive you," came the soft reply. "We tried to keep it from you."

"Then there was never any hope?" Daisy asked, white with shock.

"No. When Nathaniel started gambling, he washed his hands of you."

Daisy Savage never recovered from that visit. The fragile thread of gaiety which had upheld her all those years simply snapped. With neither husband nor father, the outward shell crumbled and left nothing. Only they would have made possible her identity, her existence. The door slammed in her face was society's last rejection. A suicide while of unsound mind was one thing, but a man who killed himself in a brothel placed his wife beyond the pale. Abandoned by family and friends, Daisy sought a haven in that dreary, dark bedroom, only to emerge, pale and trembling, to huddle in a corner in the parlor. Books, small talk, a picture—very little aroused her. Occasionally, a bouquet of flowers bought from some poor street seller might bring a smile to the wasted lips. Only alcohol gave her peace, easing the tension and the desperate fear lurking in her eyes.

In sick dread, Lelia watched her mother disintegrate, rage filling her heart. Unable to stop the downward spiral, without realizing it she, too, began to slide into a dangerous apathy until Mary Quigley shook some sense into her.

"This won't do, Lelia!" she scolded. "The only way to save your mother is to save yourself. You can't both go to pieces. You've a future to think of."

The girl shrugged helplessly. "What am I supposed to do?"

Sitting beside her on the sofa, Miss Quigley took her hand. "I think you're going to have to become a governess like me." At Lelia's frown, she continued gently, "Possibly there's enough money for two years, then you'll have to get a job. I know your mother wouldn't want you to be a shop assistant or a nurse, so that means a governess."

"And mother?"

"Well, I support a parent. You can support her." The plain face grew sad. "I know this is far from the life she planned for you, but it's best to face it now, dear. She's not going to get any better. Accept that fact, Lelia, and prepare yourself. It's not a bad life, really. Some of the families are remarkably kind, with warm, interested parents and bright children; others are not so nice, but I'm afraid you can't be choosy."

Lelia said in a small voice: "You sound as if you're leaving."

"No, dear, not yet. You're still too vulnerable, and there's more to teach you. Later, I'll go . . ." After a long pause, she whispered, "Don't be bitter about your mother."

"Why did it go so wrong? They were so happy." The brown eyes, amber colored in the light, were stony.

"It's God's will. You must pray for her, dear."

Prayer didn't stop Daisy's consuming need for gin, or Lelia's being shortchanged at the Soho pawnshop. How she despised that musty warren with the unctuous

proprietor and his crew of sleazy-eyed assistants, who always tried to fondle her as she walked down the side passage to the little closets where the desperate conducted their sad transactions. She knew he was cheating her, but what else could be done except go to another silversmith and receive identical treatment? Her mother was too drunk to handle the bargaining, Mary Quigley was embarrassed to do it, so the responsibility fell on Lelia's shoulders. After the initial shame wore off, she learned to haggle as coolly as the wicked old devil leering opposite her in the flickering gaslight. And she even occasionally let him touch her hand. Contact increased her chance of success, and each little squeeze was worth its measure in shillings.

Lelia was not yet fifteen, growing wise to the ways of the world but still chaste and pure at heart.

She and Miss Quigley kept to their old routine: morning studies and afternoon outings. Armed with umbrellas, they sauntered out wherever ladies were allowed, either walking or riding the omnibus. Just to step outside was an education. Every type of vehicle imaginable tore down the streets: equipages with crests mingled with tradesmen's carts; swift-moving hansoms darted in and out among the heavier carriages and vans, while pedestrians scrambled for safety in their race to cross the street. Above the din came the shouts of the hawkers bawling their wares, each one resplendent in cast-off clothing—shabby top hats and threadbare overcoats which might once have graced a nobleman's back, or the faded finery of a lady's dress. On one corner sat a flower seller with a wicker basket of flowers; a muffin man strolled past balancing his tin tray; a costermonger with his silk neckerchieves, shining brass buttons, ringlets, and long hair, pushed his fruit barrow; another crying "All-a-blowing, all-a-growing" wheedled a woman into buying a tiny plant from a prettily painted cart; a ragged chimney sweep slipped by with his scruffy little boy in tow, on his monthly rounds.

The match seller made Lelia weep. A thin stick of a man, his shiny, dirty bowler pushed down over scrag-

gly hair, he had a bloated face, like an unhealthy pudding. His toes stuck through cheap leather shoes. He might have been twenty or fifty—impossible to tell. There were too many others like him shuffling among the opulently dressed. Sometimes, they were tossed a copper; more often they were ignored. Nevertheless, amid the poverty happy sights abounded: an organ grinder and his monkey, or a Punch and Judy show.

They walked in the parks—Hyde, Kensington, or St. James's—watching the seasons change, and Lelia missed Devon with a fierce intensity. London's squares were less countrylike and more soothing to the mind. They were charming pockets of greenery, children, and flowers, locked iron railing fences protecting them from intruders. Always, one saw plane trees, no matter how drab the street. And in the spring and summer window boxes burst into bloom, and the meanest garden revealed some small glory.

They saw all this in many lights and moods: the sheen of early morning, a smoky mist bathing the rooftops; the brilliant, unclouded days with a milky blue-grey sky; the murky afternoons when a veil of soot hung down. Most dramatic of all were the foggy days, when the yellowish coal-smoke combined with river mists to engulf every creature and building and only pinpricks of gaslight winked through to mark a passage. Invisible horses clip-clopped along like mythical beasts. The fog made a strange and rather frightening scene, and it was good to be safe inside listening to the lost call out to each other.

With guide book in hand they wore out shoe leather, tracing London's history; and when they could no longer walk they read, borrowing stacks of books from Mudie's circulating library. A captivating life, Lelia thought, if only her mother weren't so ill.

One day Mary Quigley clapped her books shut, but instead of donning her coat she went over to the parlor window. For a long moment she studied the busy activity beneath.

"Lelia, I've something to tell you," she said, still intent on the street. "I'm leaving."

The girl stared at her in shock. "When?"

"Tomorrow."

"But why? Why?"

"You don't need me anymore, dear. You're almost sixteen. Old enough to take on the responsibility of a job, and the burden of your mother. You can handle it."

Lelia joined her at the window, her eyes blank. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

Miss Quigley smiled gently. "You were so happy. Both your mother and I agreed not to say anything until it was absolutely necessary."

Her pupil winced.

"A few tears now and then wouldn't hurt, Lelia." She brushed her cheek. "I wish you could cry more. It makes you more feminine."

Lelia remembered that stinging blow, and the irony of watching her mother drown daily in an ocean of grief. "You don't like my spirit?"

"On the contrary, I like it very much, but men like a subservient woman, and you must never forget that. Whether they be husband or master, your livelihood depends on them. Bend to their will, my dear."

"Why must you go so soon?" Lelia asked restlessly.

"Your mother can't afford to keep me on any longer, so I started to look for work. Had to—" she added ruefully. "It's a nice family in Cornwall—a big house, three children, and, I think, a good situation." She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

Lelia embraced her tightly, and for a moment they clung together, both afraid of the future.

"You're ready now, dear." Miss Quigley's tone was brisk. "I've taught you everything I know. Now you have to be your mother's support. Have you given it any thought?"

"I'll write to Aunt Marie. Maybe she can help."

"An excellent idea, Lelia."

"Of course, you realize—" Her voice was scathing.

"She hasn't set foot in Gloucester Place since mother tried to see grandfather."

"Her quarrel is not with you," the governess insisted. "Try it. Nothing's to be lost. And when I get to Falmouth, I'll look around. You don't have to rush into this immediately, but you mustn't wait too long. Now, if you can't find anything—"

"Yes?" Lelia asked wearily.

"Go to any agency, or try one of your mother's friends—" She smiled sadly. "If anyone's left. The important thing is not to depend on an advertisement, unless you get an excellent recommendation." Her eyes darkened with worry. "Unfortunately, there are some people, Lelia, who prey on young girls."

"I don't understand."

She flushed to the roots of her hair. "Men mostly—blackguards, adventurers, and such—who romance a young woman and then abandon her to the most distressing circumstances."

At Lelia's look of alarm, she put out a reassuring hand. "It's just that you're so very pretty, dear. Although I have every confidence that you'll appeal to the right man one day, there are many evil men who are also attracted to beauty."

"Have you been bothered this way?"

"No, dear," she sniffed. "Men don't bother plain women."

Lelia grew bold. "Does this have anything to do with those elegantly dressed ladies that you shy away from in the street?"

"They are not ladies," Mary Quigley said between clenched teeth. "Avoid them and all their ilk." Then she spoke softly: "Come and help me pack." As the girl approached, she took her by the shoulders. "Just remember one thing that I've always taught you, Lelia. Be pure and chaste and someday you'll find an honorable man."

"To love?"

"To marry." Her voice was very cold . . .

Miss Quigley's leave-taking left her desolate, but sev-

eral days moping convinced Lelia that she had to pull herself together for her mother's sake. She resumed the old routine, her life revolving around Mudie's library, which gave a purpose to her rather formless existence. She delayed seeking work, not through fear but out of anxiety for her mother, whose health had deteriorated alarmingly the preceding two years. Daisy was thin to the point of emaciation. Drink had bloated her lovely face and coarsened the fine features. Only her eyes bore a faint resemblance to those of the pretty, gay woman Lelia remembered, but the color was wrong. They were a flat grey: the green flecks were gone forever. Alcohol had muted her entire personality. Not for her the see-saw rages and depression; she simply retreated into an ominous silence, barely speaking for days at a time, and then mumbling her words so that her daughter could scarcely understand them.

One night, Lelia sat reading to her from *Pickwick Papers*, hoping to make her laugh a bit, or at least draw a smile. Instead, she saw her weeping.

"Mother?" she asked in concern.

"Go look at yourself in the mirror."

Bewildered, Lelia went to the chimney glass over the mantel. A great flame of light blonde hair shone back at her. Large brown eyes; strongly arched eyebrows; a delicately shaped nose; full, elegant mouth and chin; a graceful neck. Lelia needed no comment from her mother to tell her what she saw.

"Well, what do you see?"

"I'm pretty."

"Not pretty," she said irritably. "Beautiful, Lelia. Beautiful." With a sigh, she hunched down into her chair, wiping her cheeks with a soiled handkerchief. "Prettier than I ever was. And what can I do for you? Nothing!"

"I'm not asking you to do anything for me," Lelia replied, touching her shoulder.

"You should have made a brilliant match—maybe even a peer's son . . ." And then in a still, small voice, barely above a whisper, Daisy began to rage against the

inequities of her life, damning the vile man who had brought them to such a pass. Tobias Stoner—the name hissed around the room like a snake. Tobias Stoner, who had driven Nathaniel Savage to drink, to gambling, and to infidelity. Who had made Daisy's life a hell on earth. Who time and again had beaten Nathaniel at cards, and had won thousands and thousands of pounds from him. Tobias Stoner, his best friend, who ruined him, who never had sent condolences at his death, who now lived in luxury with his wife Kezia at Richmond Hill with Nathaniel Savage's wealth filling his pockets and coffers.

"Our money is probably paying his son's debts!" Daisy sneered.

Lelia stood cold and shocked, appalled that Jared Stoner—silently she spoke his name, grieving—was as despicable a man as his father.

"And I'm left with a beauty. What's the good of it?" Daisy glanced down at her hands, dejectedly fussing at her nails, which were bitten to the quick. "You'll have to start looking for a job, pet. I'm sorry, but we're very short."

So heartbroken did she look, that Lelia went and embraced her. The grey eyes brimmed with tears. "I couldn't stand the smell of liquor on his breath," she muttered thickly. "Was that it, darling? Was that it?"

Repelled by the same odor on her breath, Lelia kissed the damp forehead. "Don't keep torturing yourself, Mother. It's long gone. I'll look after you now."

Flashing a rare smile, she asked, "How, dear?"

"Miss Quigley may have something for me, and I'll write to Aunt Marie."

Mention of that name brought on a spell of coughing. Finally, with flushed face and a shaking hand, Daisy took a large swallow of neat gin from the tumbler at her side. "Just one more thing, darling—" Her eyes were as hard as rocks. "Don't be like me. Don't ever let a man break your spirit. None of them is worth it. Go into this new life, and one day you'll meet—"

"A good man," Lelia answered, filling in the too long pause.

Tears rolled down Daisy's cheeks and her daughter left her to her bitter memories.

The floodgate released that night never went up again. A quiet hatred spewed from Daisy's lips. Hatred of Tobias Stoner, the transgressor, hatred of Kezia, the extravagant, and hatred of Jared, the wastrel. Day and night, Lelia heard about the Stoners until she welcomed the idea of employment as a means of escaping that deep animosity. Yet the soft voice haunted her. Had her mother ranted at her in a violent rage, she might have taken this litany of injustice as the sick fancy of a diseased mind, but her deadly calm made her impressive. And her suffering. Wanting so badly to help her, Lelia knew that no words could assuage her grief. Gradually, it dawned on her that her mother wanted a decisive move, and that she—Lelia—was to be an instrument of sorts. Still, the mother kept her counsel.

One morning, putting down her newspaper, Daisy said in a flat voice, "Tobias Stoner is dead. You must get his son."

"Get?" Lelia looked puzzled.

"Someday, your paths may cross. It's not unlikely. He's a womanizer like his father. Beauty will attract him. Use yours." Approaching her daughter, she whispered in her ear. "Destroy him, darling, just as his father destroyed your father. And bring Richmond Hill down in ruins about his feet." She smiled. "Wreak havoc on Jared Stoner."

Trying to put that insidious voice out of her mind, Lelia Savage wrote her letters. Mary Quigley knew of an opening in Norfolk, and her aunt suggested a friend in Somerset. At last came a letter offering her a position in King's Lynn as governess to three girls and a boy. It seemed a good start and a challenge, and with a hopeful spirit Lelia mailed her letter of acceptance and began her preparations for departure.

On a chilly, wintry day toward the end of March, she walked all the way to Belgrave Square to try and

see her grandfather. For her mother's sake, she would risk his anger and ask for help.

"I'm Miss Savage," she said firmly to the haughty butler. "I must see my grandfather."

"He won't want to see you, Miss. I can tell you that much."

Controlling her temper at his impertinence, she said, "You tell him it's an emergency. I must see him." That gained her entrance into the sanctum, but he kept her standing in front of his desk, as he might an inferior.

"Grandfather—" Her voice shook. "I'm terribly worried about mother. In a few days I'm leaving for Norfolk to take a post as governess. I don't like to leave her alone. She's very ill."

He studied her with cold, dead eyes. "She's no longer my concern."

Lelia held out a beseeching hand. "Grandfather, be merciful. She coughs blood. I think she's . . . dying."

"My daughter died years ago. I do not know your mother."

Biting her lip to keep from shouting, Lelia faced him.

"I hope to God I meet you in hell one day, old man." She had the momentary pleasure of seeing a spasm of fear dart across his face, as if he, too, lived in such terror. Her eyes blurred and she ran out of the room, not giving him a chance to throw her out. On the porch, as she leaned against the door, weeping, her tears mingled with a heavy downpour.

And for the first time, walking back to Gloucester Place, bedraggled and drenched to the skin, Lelia Savage cursed Jared Stoner.

The night before she was due to leave, Daisy came to watch her pack in the squalid little room with its cheap iron bedsteads, sagging bureau, faded prints, and lopsided mirror.

Lelia had put off this question until the last moment. "Are you going to be able to manage?"

Daisy's lips trembled in the beginning of a smile, and she took a deep drink from the tumbler. "Don't

worry about me, darling. This house suits my needs and the little skivvy can fetch me my extra."

"I'll send you as much as I can."

"Just think about yourself, Lelia—" Her eyes clouded. "And get Jared Stoner for me and your father . . ." Draining the glass dry, she turned to go. A spasm of violent coughing stopped her, and she put out a hand to steady herself on the bed. Lelia caught her arm and watched in fright as blood began to pour from her mouth. Grabbing a petticoat, the daughter tried to staunch the bleeding. Useless—she had to get a doctor. Cradling Daisy in her arms, Lelia held her until she fainted. Then she raced downstairs to the Comptons' apartment. While Mrs. Compton called an ambulance, her husband returned with the distraught girl.

Daisy Savage was lying like a bundle of old clothes on the blood-soaked bed. The stained petticoat had slipped to the floor.

"My God. My God!" Lelia moaned.

"She's dead."

The daughter stared at him, white-faced.

"Have you any family? Anyone who can help you?"

That terrible old man in Belgrave Square . . . "No," she said dully, "I'm alone."

Mr. Compton appeared to be weighing something in his mind. Just how much he could afford to help her, Lelia supposed. Then he gave a thin smile. "Well, cheer up. We'll take care of things for you."

And that's exactly what they did. They called a doctor, who provided a death certificate, found an undertaker who would manage the funeral, and located a cemetery in Paddington. The thought of a pauper's grave was an abomination, so Lelia went and pawned the few trinkets she possessed. Better that than to sell her mother's wedding rings. The amount she received paid for the plot, an oak casket, the funeral cortège—one carriage following the hearse—the undertaker and his men.

On an April day in 1877, more wintry than spring-like, Daisy Neville Savage was laid to rest in Kensal

Green. Standing beside the Comptons at the grave, Lelia reflected on the irony of dying in April—that most cruel and beautiful of months. The wind was biting, but high overhead shone a mocking, luminous sky. Tiny daffodils and crocuses dotted the cemetery. Around her stretched an endless vista of plain white slabs, broken here and there by an elaborate tomb of pink marble or white stone. It was a melancholy place made even more depressing by the smell of liquor emanating from the undertaker's assistants. Bowing her head, Lelia made herself a promise: at the first opportunity she would rebury her mother in Devon. It was impossible to weep. A life as miserable as her mother's must have its release. But she grieved.

Helen Compton pressed her arm and whispered: "I will help you. Trust me . . ." But Lelia's stricken eyes looked past the other woman, unseeing.

Back in Gloucester Place, Mrs. Compton invited the bereft young woman to join them for tea. In their cluttered, airless parlor, Lelia took off her mother's shabby black coat and bonnet and sank wearily onto the sofa. Mrs. Compton settled herself in front of the tea service, while her husband retreated to an armchair next to the fireplace, where he could keep an eye on the fire and another on the small spaniel at his feet.

After the maid had gone, Mrs. Compton asked, "What will you do now, dear?"

Lelia took a sip of the steaming tea. "I have a job in Norfolk."

"Oh? Doing what?"

"I'm going to be a governess."

Putting down her cup and saucer with a faint clatter, Mrs. Compton expressed surprise. "Really? A lovely girl like you burying yourself in the country, wasting your life on someone else's children!"

She colored, trying not to show that it rankled because it did. Born to luxury, Lelia still craved it, and her mother's grandiose schemes had long ago eaten into her mind. She resented her secondhand clothes and straitened circumstances, and a governess's life was not

her ideal. For her mother's sake, she would have borne it. Now, facing life alone, Lelia felt a surge of impatience with such drudgery. Much as she loved her, she had no wish to turn into another Mary Quigley. A husband and children . . . That was her wish, and her chances of achieving that dream in her new occupation were slim indeed. Only great luck would throw in her path the eligible young curate, the prosperous doctor, or the devoted younger son.

"I don't mind," she answered tightly.

Mrs. Compton's shrewd, sharp eyes read the discontent. "Fancy your mother letting you stoop to that."

"It was the last thing she wanted. We had no money." Tears stung her eyes at the confession.

The older woman pattered over to her, her honeyed voice soothing. "There now, dear, have a good cry and don't feel ashamed. It's been an awful shock."

Lelia rocked back and forth trying to suppress her sobs. Husband and wife exchanged glances. Mrs. Compton touched the golden head.

"A dear friend of mine is looking for a companion—"

"But I have a job, Mrs. Compton," she sniffed miserably.

"Mrs. Marshall's just lost a girl who's getting married. She's very particular, but I think you'd do. Just imagine—" She clapped her hands excitedly. "Living in London in a beautiful house with a well-paid job, able to take advantage of everything the city has to offer . . ."

"I have a job," Lelia argued.

"I know, dear. I know." Gently, Mrs. Compton squeezed her shoulder. "Tell you what, have some more tea, and then just pop round with me to see Christine. She's a lovely woman—a widow and childless—very interested in helping deserving young women. Several, who wanted to be teachers, she's sponsored at Girton. Once she takes an interest in you, your future's assured." She paused, her eyes bright. "How old are you, by the way?"

"Sixteen—a few months short of seventeen."

"How nice! I only wish I were that young again."

Now don't worry. You don't have to accept any position you don't want to." Chucking the girl under the chin, she said, "I'll just send a note to say we're coming."

She talked on and on, until Lelia would have agreed to anything to shut off that silky refrain. Tired and distraught, she downed the cup of tea, dabbed at her cheeks with a trembling hand, and put her coarse outer-garments back on while the Comptons held a whispered conversation. It was proposed that she rejoin them for dinner after the visit, stay the night, and then take the train to Norfolk in the morning.

Studying them, Lelia thought, how good, how kind they were. How fortunate she was to have such friends.

Christine Marshall lived in St. James's Square in an exquisite late Georgian house—a three-storied affair with entablature and balustraded parapet above. Corinthian pilasters spanned two floors; the windows of the *piano nobile* were pedimented. A leaded fanlight surmounted a beautiful doorway which one reached by a curving staircase.

An elegant house with its door painted red.

How extraordinary. Why hide the rich mahogany? Lelia wondered. It bothered her and she stood gaping like a simpleton. Mrs. Compton gripped her arm.

"Come along, dear." She gave the sphinx-headed knocker a sharp rap.

An immaculately starched maid opened the door and regarded them with a look of disdain.

"I'm Mrs. Compton. Mrs. Marshall is expecting us."

The woman's eyes narrowed, then with a murmur she threw open the door and ushered them into a foyer. Ahead stood a spiral staircase with marble steps, an ornamental ironwork balustrade, and a thin mahogany handrail. A wall painting of sedately dancing nymphs circled the chamber, giving it a charming, fey look.

Double doors on their left were flung wide. "Please wait in here," said the maid, who then disappeared down the long hall.

Arm in arm, the two women entered the drawing room. Not since Wickford had Lelia seen such opulence. Pale yellow satin brocade dominated the room, covering the Louis Quinze furniture and walls. Classical paintings and heavy gold-framed mirrors, some reaching to the floor, glittered against the fabric. A set of Greek vases stood on the mantel. Cool light glimmered from the gas jets, and a radiance burst from the immense chandelier, dazzling the young woman. Still in deep shock over her mother's death, Lelia felt suspended in an unreal world. The beautiful, severe room troubled her. Like the red door, it was too jarring.

A rustle of silk announced their hostess, who was elegantly but austere gowned and coiffed, to enhance her beauty. Christine Marshall was remarkably handsome, with chiseled features, porcelain skin, and a melodious voice, which, although of limited range, played on one's ears like an instrument. Only her eyes, enormous and of an icy blue color, were disturbing.

"Helen!" She kissed her friend affectionately, then turned to Lelia. "My dear, it's so good of you to come. Helen tells me you've suffered a tragic loss."

Lelia nodded bleakly.

"Well, I think a glass of sherry will make us all feel better." With a light laugh, Mrs. Marshall stepped to the bellpull, then returned to the young woman's side, a look of deep sympathy on her face. "I hear you're going to Norfolk."

Her eyes are too flat, Lelia thought, saying, "Yes, I'm going to be a governess."

"Oh, dear, such a waste." She gave a sigh. "I think Helen told you that I'm looking for a companion."

"Yes."

"I like you. You're just what I've been looking for. Bright . . . pretty. I'm sure we could agree on a salary, and you won't find me too demanding. You'll get an afternoon off a week and Sundays, too." She smiled, showing perfect white teeth. "I need help with my correspondence, shopping, things like that—"

The formidable maid appeared, carrying a tray with a decanter and some glasses.

"Here you are, dear." Mrs. Marshall handed her a glass. "Drink up and we'll give you a second. It'll make you feel better."

"I don't drink," Lelia weakly protested, gazing into those emotionless blue eyes. Such a striking woman to seem so cold. Lelia decided she didn't like her at all. But to refuse to drink with them would be rude. Remembering her mother's agony, she tossed down the liquor with a grimace, to get it over and done with. Mrs. Marshall refilled her glass and walked back to Helen Compton. Then Lelia was ignored while they chatted; though one of them would glance occasionally in her direction with a smile. Mrs. Compton nervously twisted the stem of her glass between her fingers.

Why don't they speak to me? Lelia wondered, finding their behavior quite bizarre. Then objects in the room began to waver. Perspiration broke out on her forehead. She was feeling very uncomfortable . . . very unsteady.

A pinprick of warning stabbed her. Neither of them was drinking.

"I must go," Lelia said thickly. She rose, then promptly sat down again, her purse and the empty glass spilling to the floor. Mrs. Marshall fixed the young woman with her flat eyes and spoke sotto voce. Now and then Lelia caught a phrase.

"Beautiful . . . really exquisite. She'll fetch a great price. You're sure she's a virgin?"

A hiss of annoyance came from Helen Compton. "Do you think I'd bring you anything else, Christine?"

Lelia sat in the chair stupefied with terror. God! She had drunk two glasses! With a despairing cry, she pulled herself to her feet and began to walk ponderously to the door. A step . . . two . . . three steps. Then she fainted.

3.



LELIA awoke to find herself lying on a bed in a small bedroom, about the size of her room at Gloucester Place. Mirrors covered the ceiling and the walls so that whichever way she turned she saw herself. Thick padding underlay the mirrors. Groggy and weak from the drug, her head aching, she stared at her image reflected overhead. A pale young woman with waist-length blonde hair, dressed in a flowered, diaphanous negligee, lay strapped to the bed, arms and legs stretched out like a sacrificial victim.

If they had intended to kill her, she could not have been more appalled. She knew where she was and what was going to happen to her, thanks to her childhood reading of the penny dreadfuls. Only one hope existed. Mrs. Marshall might bow to tearful entreaties and release her.

The padded door swung open. Christine Marshall, with two maids behind her, entered the room.

"Please . . ." Lelia pleaded. "Please let me go!" She wept for mercy, but the woman might have been deaf.

"Bathe her," she snapped. "And wash that hair."

Unstrapping her, they lifted her inert form from the bed as if she were a marionette. They propelled her out of the mirrored room, down an interminable corridor with a number of doors, behind which she could hear whisperings and soft laughter. Occasionally, a woman came out and stared at her indifferently. Only once did she catch a flicker of pity.

Undergoing a bathing ritual in a large porcelain bath-

tub, Lelia remembered tales, read years before, of the bride being prepared for her wedding day. Who was she being prepared for? she wondered. For there was someone, she was certain. She kept overhearing bits of conversation between the maids and Mrs. Marshall. The drug was beginning to wear off. Her legs felt less heavy, and the headache had gone, but a ravenous hunger made her think she'd been unconscious for hours.

They washed and dried her hair, perfuming it with lilac scent. Then they dressed her again in the flowery negligee and led her back to her prison. On the way, Lelia noticed a flight of stairs leading to a lower level. She had not a clue as to where she was, but she knew she must try to escape. Back in the room of mirrors, one maid stayed with her while the second vanished.

"Please don't strap me!"

"Not now. You're having dinner," was the only comment. They left her alone to eat. It was a decent meal and she devoured it seeking a reservoir of strength. Finally laying down her napkin, she tiptoed to the door. There were faint sounds in the distance, but no one seemed to be standing guard outside the door. Lelia pushed it open fearfully, and looked out. The corridor stood empty. With pounding heart, she raced down the passageway to the staircase. Her soft slippers made no noise, and she floated down the stairs to the next landing. A glance to her right showed her what she was looking for—the spiral staircase leading to the entrance hall. She flew to the stairs, running down them as swiftly as caution would permit. With no one in sight, the front door stood a heartbeat away. Lelia streaked toward it. Then someone caught her in a fierce, cruel grip, crushing her. A single scream brought a hand clamped to her mouth. In the struggle, her belt tore apart and her gown opened. Her assailant began to maul her.

"All right, that's enough," said a biting voice.

Christine Marshall strode into view. "You haven't bruised her, have you?"

Lelia's captor grunted a reply.

"No one gets out of here, Miss, unless I choose to let them go. Now, are you going to be agreeable or do we have to use force?"

The guardian of the door leered and squeezed her arm. His face was monstrous, ugly. Thank God Mrs. Marshall had come in time.

"No. No force, please." Lelia was shaking.

"Good, come along then." Mrs. Marshall led her back upstairs. On went the straps, and she lay there in a paroxysm of shame while the woman pulled the negligee aside and examined her.

"No damage done." The flat eyes glittered. "Now, listen to me carefully. If you try anything like that again, I'll hand you over to that bully. He killed one of my girls. I had to turn another out into the streets. No patch-up job was going to fix her . . ."

Overhead, the mirror reflected the girl's white, pinched face.

"I have other plans for you, my beauty." Cool fingers began to stroke her body. "If you keep your wits about you, you can do very well here. You have such a lovely face and figure." A flush touched Lelia's cheeks as Mrs. Marshall fondled her breasts.

"I have a very important clientele. Peers of the realm, members of Parliament . . ." She bent and kissed a breast. "Learn how to please them and you'll find them very generous. Others will be kind to you." Her cold face softened. "Should you prove adept, I'll move you to my house of assignation, where you can live outside the premises, or—" Her tongue flicked across Lelia's lips. "You might get a protector and find yourself ensconced in a bijou nest in St. John's Wood. A number of my girls have done splendidly for themselves."

"Please, for God's sake, let me go!"

"I paid good money for you, and I'm getting back every penny." Mrs. Marshall grabbed her chin roughly and forced the girl to confront her outraged face. "I can get twenty-five pounds for your defloration, and by

God, I'm going to get what's due me. Do you think I support myself on pity?"

Sickened, Lelia turned away as the madam launched into a furious spate. "I was thirteen years old when I was raped—three years younger than you. Oh, yes, I was tricked in the same way, but I haven't done so badly for myself. The pain is but a minute of your life, and it's time you learned what it's all about." She struck Lelia lightly on the cheek. "What is it you want? A husband and children?"

"Yes." Lelia wept softly.

"Oh, you poor fool!" Contempt shone in the blue eyes. "Don't you know that men come to houses like this to escape their families? To escape their eternally pregnant, boring wives? Here, men seek amusement, pleasure, and forgetfulness—all the things they cannot find in marriage."

Tears ran down the girl's face. "My father died in a brothel."

The voice was gentle. "And was he happy with your mother?"

"No," Lelia whispered, in anguish. In the mirror overhead she watched Christine Marshall wrap her up in the negligee, as tenderly as one would a baby. "Is there no love?" she cried.

"Think of your parents and tell me," the woman replied. She loosened the straps to make her more comfortable. "Our business is not with love—that's for romantic fools and novel readers. We deal in reality. We make these men happy. What more can one ask of life? Love is an illusion." Up and down, the melodious voice played. "Don't ever make the mistake of falling in love with one of your clients. That's as fatal as disease or pregnancy."

And on that note, Lelia was left alone. Alone in the padded room with the mirrors. Dreading the sight, she shut her eyes. Only one thought consoled her. At least her mother was dead and spared her shame. Best put it out of her mind, or she couldn't bear it. . . .

A tray placed on a table woke her from a light

sleep. Dinner. Three of the straps were removed so that she could sit up and eat, while the two maids hovered. Lelia gave them no cause for alarm, preferring their torpid company to that of the monster patrolling the halls.

Her hair was carefully brushed and perfumed, and then she was strapped down again to the bed. A lilac scent was rubbed over her body, and the gown decorously fastened. The gaslight was turned down. As she was starting to drift into a restless slumber, she heard two people enter the room—Mrs. Marshall and a man. Neither of them bothered to lower their voices.

"I know she's not as young as you like them, but she's exquisite. A lovely sixteen-year-old virgin just ripe to be plucked."

"You're sure she's a virgin?" asked the man coldly.

"Madame Mourey examined her. Here's the affidavit—*virgo intacta*."

"Your price is high."

She gave a brittle laugh. "And rightly so. Wait until you see her, m'lord."

Up flared the gaslight, and Lelia saw them standing at the foot of the bed; Mrs. Marshall and an elegantly dressed man in top hat and cape. With a flick of his wrist, he took off his cloak, flashing its red satin lining, and tossed it on a straight chair. He laid the hat and cane precisely on the bureau. Straightening his cuffs, he approached the frightened girl. Christine Marshall watched him with a faint, subservient smile.

Lelia's face was subjected to a long, hard scrutiny. She, in turn, saw a gentleman. Everything about him proclaimed the grand seigneur: an aristocratic countenance, meticulously waved brown hair, haughty bearing, and magnificent clothes. Long, tapering fingers touched her negligee.

"Strip her," he ordered.

Christine Marshall, taking her time, unfastened the garment. Lelia lay before him naked.

She couldn't stand the mirrors. Instead, she watched his face. She finally understood that look once seen

fleetingly in Adam Jeffrey's eyes, as she watched this man flush with excitement, heard his labored breathing.

"Yes, I want her," he muttered thickly, cupping a full breast. "And keep the straps on."

"Do you want her gagged or chloroformed?"

"No, she can scream all she wants. Who's going to hear her in this room?" He laughed. "Send up some champagne, will you? I don't want to rush this."

The door clicked shut, leaving them alone. Ignoring Lelia, he flung himself into an armchair and lighted a cigar. When a maid brought in the champagne, he downed a large part of the bottle, as if he had no other interest in the world.

The acrid odor of the cigar ceased. The glass was set down. Strolling over to the bed, his lordship calmly began to undress. Lelia made a whimper of protest and looked away. Jerking her head around, he forced her to look at him.

"Now watch, my beauty. You want to see what's going to give you pleasure, don't you?"

Naked, without his handsome clothes, he filled her with revulsion. She drew back in horror. The pale, sensitive features glazed into a mask of lust. And then he fell upon her like an animal. Aroused to a frenzy of excitement by her bound nudity, he thrust himself into her. Pain shot through her like a sword. Again and again came the thrusts. Lelia heard herself screaming in agony, begging for mercy . . . wishing finally that he would kill her because the pain was unendurable. One searing moment brought her to the verge of fainting, and then he groaned and collapsed against her.

At last he left her alone, and while he was dressing she turned her head into the pillow and wept for her lost purity and her broken, bleeding body.

He had crushed out her spirit as one would kill a fly. Now, he stood calmly talking to Christine Marshall. "I like her, but she needs experience. In a week I'll be back. See that she learns . . ."

Stephen, Lord Hunt, the Marquis of Stowbridge—for that was his title—left Lelia to a week of hell. To ripen her, Mrs. Marshall made her peruse books of erotica, then she unleashed on the girl some of her favorite clients, and Lelia learned, oh, how she learned. She learned not to weep any more or to beg for pity; they only jeered at her misery, marching up to her bed—the young, the old, the middle-aged—grabbing her in their obscene embraces. God, how she loathed them. Still tied to the bed as punishment for her waywardness, she endured the cruelties, the degradation. One night, looking into the ceiling mirror while some grotesque man spent in her, she wept for the loving husband denied her. Lying on that bed of horror, Lelia studied her wan face, the glittering hair, the bruised and defiled body . . . and she kept herself from going mad by turning to hatred; hatred of that family who had brought her to that hideous fate. The Stoners. She swore to herself that if she ever got out of this evil house, she would destroy Jared Stoner and his family with no compunction whatsoever. It gave her something to live for. It made her torment bearable until Lord Hunt came to reclaim her, his experienced whore.

One week later, a quick study, Lelia was transformed. She had become all that he could wish for—her body profaned, her heart dead. She could smile an enticing smile, embrace him with passion, and respond with ardor to his every touch, but it was all sham. He made her flesh crawl. Still, she deceived him. Lying beside her after a lengthy session, he gazed admiringly at his lovely toy.

“Do you know, I don’t even know your name. What is it?”

Lelia blinked, forgetting for a moment what it was.

“Lelia,” said she, caressing his face.

“Lelia,” he replied. They might have been meeting at a reception. “Would you like to live with me?”

Anything to get out of this odious house, even if she had to sleep with him day and night, she thought,

smiling a ravishing smile. "Very much," she said and sought his body eagerly.

And that is how Lord Hunt came to buy Lelia Savage, paying Christine Marshall a great deal of money, with the understanding that she would be returned to St. James's Square when he tired of her. Details of this business transaction reached Lelia through Mrs. Marshall, who spent a number of hours instructing her about the vicissitudes of her new life. In addition, she provided the girl with a smart traveling outfit, her old clothes having been consigned to the rubbish heap.

An hour before the leave-taking, Christine Marshall arrived to oversee the toilette. A maid had just finished lacing Lelia into the tightest corset she had ever worn—a cuirass bodice made of figured silk, whose leather bands cut like a saber. Her drawers and chemise were of dainty, pink and cream satin. High boots adorned her feet, and her hair was elaborately styled.

"Not too much, dear," cautioned Mrs. Marshall, watching her put on makeup. Rouge on the cheekbones, reddened lips, and shadow on the eyelids. Lord Hunt's painted harlot, Lelia thought grimly.

"Beauty such as yours can stand alone. Just make sure, however, that the gentlemen get a good look at your charms." And she yanked the corset up, pushing Lelia's breasts even higher.

"You're terribly fortunate, you know. Lord Hunt's family is one of the most ancient in the realm. If you satisfy him, he'll be exceedingly generous, but I must warn you he's skittish with his mistresses. None of them last long."

The girl quailed. "And that means?"

"You'll come back to me." She smiled. "Or you might move on to an even better catch. A wealthier, younger man with not such a bitch for a wife. Lord Hunt will exhibit you to his friends as his latest jewel, but be careful—he's jealous of his women. Cultivate these people from a distance. One of them might become a new protector . . ."

"I loathe his touch," Lelia said bleakly.

Mrs. Marshall's face blanched. With a hissed intake of breath, she muttered: "My God! Have you learned nothing here?"

Dressed and ready to go, Lelia stood waiting for the door to be unlocked. "I have learned everything, madam, that you could teach me. Don't worry, I will please him. I will make him as happy as humanly possible." She smiled ironically, knowing that her own humanity had been lost in that mass rape. . . .

The flat, cold eyes searched hers, carefully. Then Mrs. Marshall kissed her full on the mouth. Hiding her disgust, Lelia forced a smile, deluding her. Mrs. Marshall unlocked the door.

Lord Hunt was waiting for her downstairs in the pale yellow drawing room. He stood up when she came in and she was grateful for that small act of courtesy.

"Charming!" he murmured to Mrs. Marshall. "I ravish a girl and get a woman." They laughed and Lelia smiled, everyone parting on most friendly terms. Entering the corridor, Lelia froze in apprehension. The brute watchdog was at his station, but at a signal from his employer he opened the door with a flourish. She stepped out to freedom on a glorious spring day. The street was alive with color—flowers blossoming in the window boxes, trees unfurling soft green leaves. Winter's starkness had vanished, bringing hope and new life. Leaning on her protector's arm, Lelia smiled mechanically, acutely aware that never again would she appreciate such simple beauty. All existence was tainted for her.

She remembered the prince in her childish daydreams . . . the prince who would take her in his strong arms and marry her—Jared Stoner. Jared Stoner, she thought dully, whom I hate with all the passion my dead heart holds. One day I will destroy you, Jared Stoner. . . .

Lelia's new residence was at Lodge Place, Regent's Park, a magnificent setting for a kept woman. It was an exquisite house with a mews in back for the carriage

and horses. It was beautifully furnished and well-staffed, too, with a butler, footman, cook, two maids, and a lady's maid. The former mistress had been dismissed only a few days before Lelia's installation. In drawers and closets, Lelia could still smell her perfume. And she wondered how long she herself would last.

Lord Hunt spent two nights a week with his mistress—sometimes more, depending on the length of his stay in London. The rest of the time he was at the family seat in Kent. His visits were continued regularly even when the season began and the Marchioness opened up their Mayfair house. If Lelia couldn't abide him, she soon learned to tolerate him, and she grew adept at dissembling. She uncovered a store of erotica in his library, and study of these obscenities, plus knowledge gained at Mrs. Marshall's, enabled her to satisfy him in bed. She did anything he asked of her—no matter how repugnant—so that he would keep her on and not send her back to St. James's Square. Impulsive by nature, the act of possession obsessed him: the lingering kiss, the tender caress had no meaning for him. Not once did he hold her.

In other ways, he was considerate. He gave her a splendid wardrobe: the lingerie alone cost over one hundred pounds, and she had a score of dresses for every occasion, the most beautiful being the evening gowns. She was encouraged to parade daily in Hyde Park in the landau emblazoned with his crest, and to exercise her horse in a skintight habit in Rotten Row. They attended the opera and the theatre, and he reveled in all the attention she received. Soon, Lelia was gazing into the eyes of some of the most important men in the realm. Proposals were made, notes of assignation slipped into her hand. During those months she became one of the most notorious women in London. Everyone fought to meet Lord Hunt's beautiful whore. Her success was assured when other famous courtesans eyed her with looks of fury.

Six months went by, and then one night Lord Hunt took Lelia to a party given by one of the reigning demi-mondaines. It was a party fit for a king, and indeed, the Prince of Wales was there with several of the Marlborough House set. Lelia had never seen so many jewels lavished on so many beautiful women, such magnificent clothes, or so many men of the London establishment, none of them with their wives. Tables groaned with dazzling arrays of food, endless bottles of champagne were consumed, and a full orchestra played continuously. During a lull a pianist began to play an extraordinary piece, which Stephen whispered was Liszt's *Liebestraum*. Lelia stood, enraptured, her heart soaring as it hadn't in years. Across the room, a man was watching her, a tall, dark man with a brooding face. Their eyes met, and she stared at him transfixed, her mouth opening slowly in astonishment as the music soared to a crescendo. It was Jared Stoner. He moved toward them, but Stephen had seen him and drew her away.

Under her rouge, she was very pale. Noticing her pallor, Stephen asked if she were all right.

"Yes, please, if we could just walk a bit . . ."

But Stoner had caught up with them. "M'lord, you must introduce me to this lovely woman!"

He was even taller than Lelia had remembered, towering over Stephen. The beauty of the archangel had coarsened into satanic lines. Yet; it was still an arresting face, one that quickened the heartbeat.

"I was sorry to hear about your father, Stoner," Lord Hunt said.

The other man shrugged. "Ah, well, better a fall from a horse than a lingering death." He smiled at Lelia.

Forced to make an introduction, Lord Hunt presented Jared Stoner to his mistress. He, in turn, took her hand and kissed the palm, the pressure of his lips making her tremble. Two emotions warred within—fascination with hatred. Instinctively, she knew he would be a dangerous, passionate lover, and for the

first time in her life she felt a surge of desire as his warm, dark eyes stripped her bare. Aware of the effect he was having on her, he tightened his grip on her hand, but she swayed.

Stephen put out an arm to steady her. "Lelia?" he asked. "Are you not well?"

Stoner dropped her hand and she pressed it to her forehead. "No, I'm sorry, so many people . . ."

"Well, don't disgrace me by fainting," Stephen muttered in her ear and set off to find their hostess. The party was at its height and he loathed being deprived of pleasure.

Adieux made, they took their departure. Coming down the grand staircase, Lelia noticed a couple in animated conversation. The woman was just a flash of jewels and silk, but she caught a brief glimpse of the man—Adam Jeffrey, or so it seemed to her disordered senses. Jeffrey . . . Stoner . . . An eerie feeling touched her, as if she'd stumbled into a house of ghosts.

Revived by a warm night breeze, she was fairly comfortable driving back to Lodge Place, strong enough to withstand Stephen's tirade.

"How could you let a bout of giddiness ruin my evening?" he shouted. "Really, I'd like to give you a good thrashing. I don't know why I keep you," he added peevishly. "Any little bitch would do just as well. Except—" His laugh was coarse. "You're so damnable pretty."

Flicking open her cape, he touched the décolletage. "The gown is too low, Lelia."

"No lower than the rest. Isn't that what you wanted?"

His tone was icy. "I didn't like the way Stoner looked at you." Trying to pacify his rage, she ran his hand across her nearly naked breasts. "Shall we go to bed, m'lord?"

They had reached Lodge Place. "No," he replied. "Not tonight. I'm going back to that party and pick up a more lively doxy." Driving off, he left Lelia alone on the porch, alone to summon the butler. Fortunately,

she had enough self-control not to faint until she reached her bedroom.

Lelia knew that he found someone to sleep with that night, because a cruel, anonymous note came in the post the next day. Also, Lord Hunt sent a curt scribble announcing that he was taking a month's holiday with his wife on the Continent. Since they rarely spent more than a week together, Lelia sensed he was in the grip of a new passion. On his return, he wrote, he hoped to find her in better humor. More amiable.

Was he done with her so quickly? she thought in alarm.

To her dismay, the illness did not abate. Each morning without fail, a bout left her prostrate. The sight and odor of food was nauseating. She could eat nothing, and so great was her fatigue that most of her days were spent in bed. Eventually, her maid, disobeying orders, summoned a doctor.

Returning unannounced, Lord Hunt found Lelia lying asleep on the chaise longue, wrapped in a quilt with her hair loose.

Shaking her awake, he said with a touch of impatience, "What's this your maid's babbling about? That you're sick?"

She smiled faintly. "A slight indisposition—nothing more."

"But it's been going on for weeks—"

"Nothing, I tell you."

Looking perplexed, he strolled around the room, leanly elegant. Picking up a small Greek head, he examined it. "Are you pregnant?"

"Yes," she confessed.

He glared at her. "For God's sake, didn't they teach you anything?"

Afraid of his wrath, Lelia replied tightly, "Yes, of course, but something went wrong."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Her heart was pounding. "I've tried some things—"

nothing's worked. I'll see Mrs. Marshall tomorrow and ask her for help."

He gripped her shoulders hard, hurting her. "Is it my child?"

In shock, Lelia stared at him, tears welling in her eyes. Though she knew that he detested emotional scenes, her control broke into a storm of weeping, all her loneliness and fear surfacing. So great was her distress, that finally even Lord Hunt was moved.

With a contrite expression he patted her head. "I'm sorry, Lelia. That was cruel, but others have tried to abuse me before." Retrieving the quilt which had fallen to the floor, he tucked it around her. "Don't do anything rash. Leave it to me. I'll be away for a week or ten days—we'll settle things then."

"Don't send me back to that house," she implored. "Stephen, please, anything but that—"

But he turned on his heel and left, without another word.

For ten days he was absent. Lelia did nothing except sleep, too enervated even to get out of bed or to read. Not even the memory of Jared Stoner aroused a spark of interest. Stephen, Lord Hunt, held her fate in his custody. Her lot was no better than a slave's, and sick with dread, she waited for the outcome.

Her protector returned to Lodge Place.

"Well," he drawled, standing arrogantly at the bedside, "it appears to be my child."

A stab to the heart couldn't have wounded more. Had he questioned all the tradesmen, the servants, and the postman, too? she wondered acidly. Lolling against the satin pillows, she gave him as cool a look as she dared. "I'm terribly sorry about this. I was incredibly careless, but I'll take care of it—"

"How?" he interrupted curiously.

"Abort it. I'll try ergot."

"No. No, Lelia, I've a better idea." He sat down on the edge of the bed, and dropped his mocking tone for the first time in their association. "I have everything in life I've ever wanted, except for one thing—a son.

My wife has presented me with five daughters. Five!" He grimaced. "After the last birth, she announced that nothing would make her go through that again. Desperate for a son, I insisted on my conjugal rights, which sent her in tears to her family—an infinitely more powerful group than mine. Under pressure—it was suggested that a sprig of their house marry one of my daughters and take the name—I capitulated." An ancient hurt burned in his eyes. "So I am denied a legitimate son. My bastards are sprinkled about the countryside—girls," he sneered. "Oh, I had some boys. One was stillborn. A second died before he reached his first year. The last, a lovely boy, succumbed to cholera when he was eleven." He gave her a shrewd glance. "So, you see I'm in the market for a son." Opening her peignoir, he began to caress her abdomen. "You're a healthy, strapping girl. Give me my son, Lelia," he added huskily.

She was seventeen years old, carrying the child of a man who did not love her and whom she didn't love. Lelia found it unbearably sad.

"And if it's a girl?" Her voice shook.

"She'll get an excellent dowry, and you'll be well looked after. Now, if it's a boy—" He looked rapt. "He'll attend the finest schools and be the recipient of a lifetime income. On his coming of age, he'll receive a substantial fortune. As my son, doors will open to him despite his illegitimacy . . ." A look of pain crossed his face. "I'm not a young man, Lelia, and I want this child. I want my son." Clasp ing her hands, he whispered, "What do you say?"

Impulsively, she reached out to embrace him, but he turned aside. Her arms dropped. "I'm frightened."

With a laugh, he reassured her. "Silly girl, there's nothing to fear. Oh, a bit of discomfort, but you'll have the best medical help available, and a wet nurse so that you won't ruin that lovely figure. Well?"

A bargain he wanted, and a bargain he got. Had he once taken her in his arms, a little tenderness might

have won her love, so starved was she for affection. But he offered nothing.

"I agree, on one condition," Lelia said curtly.

"Oh?"

"That you never, never send me back to Mrs. Marshall's."

An eyebrow shot up. "Was it that bad?"

"Very bad," she replied, looking him straight in the eye.

With a shrug he got up from the bed. "Agreed," he smiled. "Now, something really important. I must move you out of London. My wife is well-known, and if this reaches her it could be dangerous for you."

"Dangerous?" she echoed with faint contempt.

"Yes, Lelia," he answered gravely. "Hers is a vengeful nature. Although we lead separate lives, she keeps careful tabs on my mistresses. Affairs don't bother her, unless a male child is produced. Then she gets ugly . . ." With more emotion than she had ever seen him display, he gave her a warning. "Take good care of the child. Guard it, if it's a boy."

"Of course, Stephen. Whatever you say . . ." But she took it as one more of his cruel jests.

4.



LORD HUNT chose Amberley for her sanctuary. It was a magical Sussex town in a captivating landscape, four miles north of Arundel at the head of a gap in the Downs through which the river Arun swept to the Channel. Nesting on a low terrace, the village overlooked the winding river, its solitary street leading to

the ruins of a fourteenth-century castle. The hamlet was built of warm grey stone, with thatch tipping over dormer windows and gables, richly painted woodwork, and tall, colorful chimneys.

Lelia's home was on the outskirts—an ivy-covered, ancient brick building. High stone walls were overhung with flowers and vines and stone paths ran between bordered flower beds and flowering trees. Seeing it, she wept for her lost youth, her childish dreams of happiness, and for what they had become.

Taking her hand, Lord Hunt muttered, "Our son will thrive here." Then he made it quite plain that she had no other function in life than to bear his child.

"Naturally, I've taken another mistress, Lelia. You can't expect me to remain celibate during this period—" The girl's hurt protestations were cut short. "I might harm the baby if I touched you, and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

All she wanted was his arms around her, comforting her in the long hours of the night. She was afraid of childbirth, of dying, of leaving her child an orphan in a merciless world. . . .

But there were compensations for Lord Hunt's coldness. As his interest in her moved beyond the bed, the intellectual life replaced the physical. Crates of books, music, and art paper arrived from Lewes to keep her busy. She was grateful to him for leaving her alone, only alarmed that her hold on him might diminish. A daughter might sever all their ties.

Still, Lelia was content. So beautiful was the well-staffed house and grounds, so idyllic the village, that it would take an insensitive person not to be swayed by its charm. What matter if none of the neighbors spoke to her, if they turned aside at her approach, if the shopkeepers treated her with faint derision? They knew what she was, but she had lost her soul at St. James's Square and cared not a jot for their scorn.

She cared only about her baby. When she was five months pregnant, Lelia could no longer ignore its moving, vital presence. The wonder of the tiny being,

pushing and kicking against her body, gave her an added strength to defy Stephen, if necessary, should he decide to take the child away from her. Sewing the layette became her great joy. The nursery was painted a half-dozen times before it pleased her; the shelves stacked with brightly colored toys, and she made no effort to find a wet nurse, happily assigning that task to herself.

At night, alone in her drafty bedroom, Lelia would lift up her nightgown before the pier glass and gaze in awe at her transformed body. And then she would weep . . . weep for the great love of her life, whom she would never know, and for the shame and torment of bearing a child by a man she did not love.

April, the month which had given her so much sorrow, gave Lelia her baby. Not due until May, she barely had time to reach the house and send word to the midwife and nurse before the second stage of labor began. A flurry of activity hit the household. While Lelia was being undressed and put in clean undergarments and a short nightgown, the housemaid made up the bed with well-aired linen, and opened the windows to a warm spring breeze. Lelia's hair was braided for comfort, and a basket of baby clothes tucked into a corner. With the midwife's arrival, she was encouraged to walk, sit, stand, or lie down—anything to relieve those grinding pains. Walking, Lelia found, helped withstand the pain's intensity. Again and again the pains came, low in the back, then extending knife-like across the abdomen, followed by the womb's contractions. What she didn't know about labor, she learned with harsh immediacy. They walked miles around that small room, the midwife propping her up when she sank against her in utter defeat.

The doctor appeared as Lelia switched to the third stage, and the grinding pains changed to the fierce bearing-down ones. Hastily, they put the patient on her left side in bed, so that her foot braced a bedpost with

each stab of pain. Five agonizing spasms later it was all over. She lay exhausted, listening to a lusty wailing.

The midwife sponged off her forehead. "It's a fine little boy, Mrs. Savage."

"Thank God! Thank God!" She groaned, tears filling her eyes.

Dr. Hardin smiled at her. "You're a wonderful patient. Silent as a mouse. You should have screamed away. I'm used to it."

Lelia smiled weakly. "I've no more screams left."

Bathed and dressed, the child was laid in Lelia's arms. Silent tears ran down her cheeks.

At last I have someone to love, she thought, as he nuzzled intently at her breasts.

After a long sleep, she began an easy recuperation. Her afterpains were almost nonexistent. She ate a good, light diet with zest, and fed her baby with joy. Stephen, alas, could not share her pleasure. At a house party with his wife in Warwickshire, he wasn't expected back in London until the end of the week. Fearing that it might fall into the wrong hands, Lelia purposely delayed sending a message. Meanwhile, she enjoyed the baby alone. And like all doting mothers, examined every finger and toenail with amazement, smelling the sweet fragrance of his hair, and thinking him the dearest and most funny-looking little person in the world.

On the third day, she awoke with aching, leaking breasts—the milk was coming in—and her child speedily relieved her discomfort. While nursing, she complained of a headache and, chilly, asked the nurse to shut the windows, though it was another balmy day. Throughout the morning, Lelia grew increasingly restless, a rapidly escalating fever alternating with severe chills. By midafternoon, an urgent summons went out to Dr. Hardin. His entry found her wracked with acute abdominal pain.

She heard him utter tensely to the nurse: "Puerperal fever."

It was the killer infection which all women dreaded in childbirth. Even Lelia knew that much.

"Am I going to die?" she asked, frightened.

He had the grace to be honest with her. "You are very ill, Mrs. Savage. Is there anything I can do for you? Can I send for your family?"

"They're dead. The baby is all I have. Get word to the Marquis . . . please—" And then a giant hand blotted out her sight.

For ten days Lelia Savage lay on the brink of dying; twice the rector was called to her bedside. Lord Hunt infuriated Dr. Hardin and upset the household by dashing down from London and devoting all his attention to his newborn son, Lelia's crisis leaving him unmoved. Assured that a healthy wet nurse had been found, and his mistress was in competent medical hands, he hastened back to the London whirl.

Finally regaining consciousness, Lelia thought she was merely awakening from a nap after nursing her son. A strange woman sat beside her and Lelia's simple request to feed her infant sent her into an agitated flutter. In vain did the young mother plead. The baby had a wet nurse, the woman said. Something's happened to him, Lelia thought in alarm. Her wild threat to get out of bed stirred the woman to get Emma, the child's nurse. And they sent a rush message to Dr. Hardin before Emma appeared with a swaddled bundle.

"I want to feed my son!" Lelia shouted.

"Ma'am, you were so ill we had to get a wet nurse."

By now she was furious. "I feel fine, and I can manage," she said fiercely, thinking them all mad. She held out her arms.

Emma, with a low sigh, handed him to her mistress, then watched with a tense face as the baby was put to the breast. At first he fussed and cried, but when a few drops of milk appeared, he settled down, sucking contentedly.

"Dr. Hardin, Mrs. Savage insists on feeding her baby," Emma wailed to the young man standing in the doorway.

Handing her his satchel, he strolled over to his patient. "How are you feeling?"

"Wonderful." Her smile was radiant.

Turning back to Emma, he said: "Dismiss the wet nurse. This is the tonic she needs to get well."

And Lelia did improve rapidly, so swiftly that in a week's time she was walking around the bedroom and visiting little David's nursery.

One day, Dr. Hardin, checking her progress, said softly: "I want to talk to you, Mrs. Savage. May I sit down?"

A bit bewildered by his gravity, she nodded.

"Do you remember how ill you were?"

"Not really . . . chills . . . a bit of a fever. Why?"

"It wasn't a bit of a fever, Mrs. Savage. It was puerperal fever."

He looked very drawn, and Lelia thought he must be very young and that such moments came hard to one so sensitive.

"I saved your life—"

"Well, out with it," she snapped.

"I'm so sorry . . . You won't be able to have any more children."

"I don't understand—" she said stupidly.

"It happens sometimes. We can't do anything about it."

"No . . . more . . . children?"

"No. You're sterile."

Exhaling a long breath, Lelia stared at the timbered ceiling, then glanced at Kenneth Hardin, who looked crushed.

"Don't feel badly, Dr. Hardin. You did everything possible to save me, and I'm grateful." Her voice sounded unnaturally high. "Frankly, this is the best thing that could happen to me in my profession."

Shock registered on his gentle features. "I don't understand, Mrs. Savage."

"It's Miss Savage," she said cruelly, on the edge of hysteria.

He came to her bedside, his voice low. "Are you going to be all right?"

"Of course." The brittle voice was gay. "I have a son, don't I?"

Putting the enormity of his words out of mind, Lelia concentrated on the baby, lavishing on him all the love thwarted by Stephen. She adored David. He brought hope back into her life. With David at her side, what matter if she could never bear another child?

Eventually, even Lord Hunt fell under his enchantment. Stephen, the cold, unemotional nobleman, doted on his bastard son, and as he and Lelia drifted apart physically, they came closer together in love for their young son. Every child is worshipped in varying degrees by its parents, but this baby was crucial to their relationship. He mellowed Stephen. When Lelia burst into sobs, the final day of David's weaning, Stephen kissed her—he who could not abide tears. Hand in hand, they watched their boy's progress, enthralled. Not even Lord Hunt's very active London night life could dim this joy. Lelia knew that he was a constant visitor at Mrs. Marshall's, and that another mistress had been installed at Lodge Place, but these things were inconsequential. No vicious letter broke the news; he told her about the mistress himself, which she respected. What they shared—companionship and delight in their child—was infinitely more important than such tawdry doings.

Only when Lelia was weaning the baby did she finally understand the full implication of Dr. Hardin's remarks. In very low spirits, she consulted him.

Tears glittered on her lashes. "Is there no hope for me?"

"For another baby?"

"Yes."

"It's a vicious infection. So many die. But—" He shrugged. "Anything is possible. A miracle might happen and let you conceive again."

She dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief,

while he wrote out a prescription for a sleeping draught.

"Does that man love you?"

His bluntness jolted her into a frank reply. "No."

"And what kind of life is it for you?" His voice was grim. "Did you never think of taking the baby to another town, or county, changing your name, and starting afresh? One day, you might marry—"

By now she had regained her composure. "I know you're fond of me, Dr. Hardin. Would you marry me?"

His blush of shame was her answer. "You see," Lelia said crisply. "No honorable man wants a whore for a wife."

"How can anyone so young be so cynical?"

"It was done in a week . . ." Twisting the gold band on her finger which gave her the status of "Mrs. Savage," she examined his crestfallen face. "My child and I have a good future with this man. My destiny—" And she smiled at his distress. "Lies with Lord Hunt."

"One day I hope he takes the bitterness out of your eyes," Kenneth Hardin exclaimed angrily, rising to his feet.

At the door's threshold, she paused. "You saved my life and I'm grateful to you."

"Lelia—" he called, but she had gone. A few months later he left Amberley, leaving no forwarding address. She felt only that she'd lost a kind friend—no more.

But his words haunted Lelia, upsetting her peace of mind. As David grew and their physical intimacy lessened, occasionally she felt twinges of anger and of a fierce, desperate desire for a hard mouth on hers, a pair of strong arms, and a man who would take her to bed and make love to her. Never had she seen Kenneth Hardin as a lover, and Lord Hunt never approximated one. To make love was to give too much of himself. What hurt Lelia most was the sight of people in love. It was impossible for them to hide the glow in the eye, the hand that wished so much to touch the beloved, and she turned from these bewitched couples like one damned.

Calling herself a moonstruck fool, she focused all her energies on the baby, taking over many of the nurse's chores, and devoting more time to the nursery than most mothers because she was so much alone. Stephen visited whenever possible, usually spending a night every two weeks. But sometimes long intervals passed before he could get away.

When David learned to walk, Lelia took him on small outings down Amberley's single flint-walled street, and soon they were familiar figures to the townspeople and shopkeepers. The elders and children took to the baby at once, captivated by his mischievous ways and sunny disposition, and Lelia gained a dram of approval as a result. A woman who loved her child that much couldn't be all bad, they opinioned, and nods of recognition and polite queries about David now greeted Lelia. Flowers he adored, and would examine all the gardens with minute interest. Then he would race her joyously to the castle ruins, where they would poke among grey stone walls—some of them over six hundred years old—and explore the ivy-covered arches and the remains of a sixteenth-century fortified manor house once occupied by the Bishops of Chichester. Entranced by each stone and rock, David would beg for a tale about a knight and his lady fair. After the story, Lelia would toss him in the air and watch his blond curls fly in the wind like a sunbeam. He had her coloring and Stephen's features—blessed child.

Leaving the ruins, sagging with laughter, they would gaze, enchanted, at the sparkle of the water-meadows in the grassland called Amberley Wild Brooks. Down they flew to see if they could spot any birds. Then all the cattle had to be counted one by one. Sometimes, on a quest for tiny flowers hidden in the turf, they straggled behind the sheep on their way to the Downs. Other days the pony-chaise introduced them to countryside pleasures: heavily wooded, rolling lanes; timbered cottages with low-pitched roofs of Horsham stone slate; hedgerows that were a mass of wild clematis; ancient trees in the Weald.

Lelia was happier than she had been in years. And in the love this child showed her, she lost her bitterness over the horror at St. James's Square.

One afternoon, Stephen and Lelia were in the garden with David on a late winter day, so warm that they could step outside without overcoats. Their son had spied an early crocus, and was waving it in triumph as he tore up and down the flagstone path.

"Lelia," Stephen touched her hand. "I want to do something for you."

"For me?" She looked astonished. "Whatever for?"

"I feel . . . I feel—" He faltered, and she wondered if he, too, were tormented by that ugly memory. "You've given me so much . . . David—"

She smiled gently. "You gave me David."

His face went rigid with strain, surprising her. "I want . . . I must do something special for you, Lelia."

He's trying to break with me, she thought with a dart of fear. She realized in the next breath that it wasn't that, but the closest he could ever come to an apology.

Lelia embraced him and for a moment he clung to her. It seemed they might be entering a new period of intimacy. Of affection. . . .

When next he came he brought a velvet box, which he handed her almost shyly.

Nestling on the satin was a magnificent parure of diamonds—a necklace, earrings, and bracelet.

"A queen's gift!" Lelia whispered in amazement.

"No, Lelia, for the mother of my son."

Deeply touched, she wept. It was a mistake on this occasion. Stephen returned to London, fearing, perhaps, a new tenderness if they slept together, and so Lelia spent the night alone with her fabulous jewels, knowing that she and her boy were secure in his chilly affections, which was really all she could ask for.

April 1882: David's fourth birthday was celebrated and his father appeared with a carriage load of gifts. Now that the boy was growing and able to talk better

and better, Lord Hunt was a more frequent visitor. Every week he appeared, varying the day to confound his wife's suspicions. When one Wednesday came without a sign of him, Lelia wasn't alarmed. Two days went by, then a third, and a fourth. On Monday, she was more than a little anxious, appreciating for the first time just how isolated they were in Amberley without friends or newspapers. She waited a week and a day and then dispatched the coachman to make inquiries in London.

Several days later he returned. Lelia, who had been building blocks with David, gave the child to Emma and faced the trembling man.

"Well? What is it?" Her voice was crisp.

He looked battered and dusty, like the roads he'd been traveling, not his usual starched self. "I'm sorry, ma'am, Lord Hunt . . ."

"Yes?"

"He's dead, ma'am. Heart attack." He blinked at her painfully.

What a waste that we never loved one another, Lelia thought sadly. What could she tell David, who adored his father? For him she grieved, not the dead man. And she put off telling him.

But she found that she missed Stephen, whom she had so feared at first and later had come to pity—a legitimate son might have transformed him. It was a strange irony. Love for David had bound them together, and it was a bond that could not be cut in a minute. Lelia spent the next week in a state of apathy. Her increasing dilemma and loneliness provoked bad headaches, so debilitating that one night she dosed herself heavily with chloral, and woke up very late the next morning.

Sipping chocolate in the parlor, overlooking the garden, Lelia gradually became aware of an abnormal quiet—no small boy's thumps or yells of glee. Summoning the housemaid, she asked where David was. Out with his nurse, she learned, and thought no more about it.

Close to lunchtime, she dressed. Still no sign of him. Passing through the parlor, she caught a glimpse of Emma, the nursemaid, leaning on the front gate chatting with the postman. Opening the door, Lelia called, "Where's David?"

Up the front walk, she came scurrying. "Your cousin took him for a walk, ma'am."

Lelia went white. "I have no cousin."

A baffled look crossed the woman's face. "She said she was your cousin. You were asleep. I didn't want to wake you—"

"I have no cousin!" Lelia screamed. Calling the child, she ran out into the road. He had been forbidden to go beyond the gate unless accompanied by his nurse. Shouting his name, she ran toward the main street, the gardener and servants following closely. In the village, no one had seen David. Stopping a number of people, Lelia implored them for help. A search party was formed, but a deadly voice in her brain told her it was too late. Something evil had happened to David.

Stephen's voice haunted her: "Don't leave him alone. Guard him well." God! And she had never believed him. Never taken him seriously. . . .

An old woman said that David and a lady had been seen walking toward the castle ruins. But the ruins were safe. Nothing there could harm a child . . .

A thousand flowers had they gathered in these ruins. Now, Lelia picked one aimlessly and called his name. There was no answer. But even from that distance she could spot a piece of colored cloth in the water-meadows. She was the first to reach the little body floating in the water.

"He's not allowed to come here by himself!" she shrieked. "He's been killed . . . killed!"

Someone tried to hold her back, but pushing him aside, Lelia plunged in. Seizing her child in a tender embrace, she carried David back to the bank. A man flung down his jacket and she laid him down, swaddling him in the garment. Then, in a paroxysm of grief,

she fell upon the chilled body, rocking him in her arms. The boy must be taken to the coroner, said the constable. Lelia refused to hand her son over, and had to be physically restrained while they lifted him up.

"It's murder . . . murder!" she shouted into a sea of shocked faces. Catching sight of Emma, Lelia called out, "For God's sake, tell them what you told me. About the woman who took him walking."

Haltingly, the nurse told her story to the policeman and the crowd. David had been taken for a walk—by his mother's cousin, she thought.

A burst of inspiration made Lelia ask, "Did she come in a carriage?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, dear God! Yes, she did," she cried.

Instantly, Lelia knew what had happened. With Stephen dead, she was no longer protected. This must have been an emissary from his wife—his very jealous wife—who wanted the child dead.

"Was there a crest on the carriage?" the mother persisted.

Emma nodded, too frightened to speak.

"The Marquis' crest?"

Again came a nod.

"You realize the gravity of your suspicion, Mrs. Savage?" the constable asked. "Can you prove it?"

Sensing his hostility, she stared at him in growing bewilderment. "Where are you taking my child?"

"To the doctor's. Someone will take you home." Abruptly, he turned away.

Supported on either side, Lelia was helped home by several villagers. A woman offered to go in with her and get clothes for David—for his burial. The house was in chaos. Furniture broken, books slashed . . . her bedroom torn apart. No imagination was needed to guess the object of their search. The parure was gone. In her son's damaged room, Lelia chose his best suit of clothes and his favorite stuffed animal—a little bear.

At the doctor's, she was not allowed to see her child. Only the presence of the Anglican clergyman kept her from going berserk. His wife urged her to come home

with them, and too tired to resist, with no wish ever to set foot in her home again, Lelia complied.

Neither of them questioned her, out of kindness, Lelia first thought. Later she realized that it was less compassion guiding them than embarrassment. How could they help her? Everyone knew she was a kept woman, who had affronted a powerful family. Stowbridge, Lord Hunt's ancestral home, was in the neighboring county of Kent, where his wife's great family also lived. The villagers had good reason to feel intimidated.

Lelia sat in the Meachums' parlor, dry-eyed, refusing all offers of refreshment, thinking in terror, Oh, God, Stephen, why didn't I listen? Why didn't I listen to you?

A loud knock on the front door broke the tense silence. Mr. Meachum vanished, and Lelia heard the constable's booming voice. She ran into the hall, her voice strident. "Well, did you learn anything?"

His look was cautious. "No, ma'am. I've just been telling the vicar that the funeral will be held tomorrow morning."

She cringed. "May I dress my child?"

"I think that highly inadvisable, Mrs. Savage."

Tears stung her eyes. "Please . . . please!"

Gently, Mrs. Meachum drew her back into the parlor. The front door shut, then there was a long delay. The vicar appeared, his face grave.

"My dear Mrs. Savage—" Wilting at her stare, a blush began to creep from his collar to his hairline. "I have very bad news . . ."

His pauses irritated even his wife. "What is it, George?"

"Tomorrow your son will be buried in our church . . ." He coughed delicately. "Do you have any money?"

Lelia's eyes glittered. "For the plot and care of the grave? Oh, yes, never fear!" Opening her bag, she handed him some bills. "That's also to take care of the headstone . . ."

After making a careful count, he pocketed them. "Fine, that's more than enough. Just tell me what you want on the stone . . . I'm officiating, but something else has come up—"

Only one thing could make him so nervous, so uncomfortable. Pulling her shawl tighter, Lelia rose to her feet. "Well?"

"There's a warrant out for your arrest."

She blanched. "What have I done?"

With a helpless glance at his wife, the vicar explained, "Lady Hunt, the Marchioness of Stowbridge, accuses you of stealing an immensely valuable diamond parure. Today, the police found it among your effects."

Her voice was flat. "Lord Hunt gave me those jewels as a gift shortly before our son's fourth birthday."

Mr. Meachum mopped a damp brow. "According to the police, it was an anniversary present for his wife—one she was expecting. Lord Hunt inadvisably brought them to Amberley and you stole them. Rather than cause any trouble, he gave a duplicate set to his wife."

"No, no . . ." Lelia said slowly. "Stephen gave them to me." She looked him straight in the eye. "I made him happy, you see."

Flouncing away with a mortified explanation, the vicar consulted with his wife. At a nod from her, he left the room. Gingerly, she approached their visitor. "Mrs. Savage, I'm so sorry. I'm afraid this does rather change things . . ."

Lelia's mouth hardened. "You can harbor a bereaved mother, but not a thief?"

A sigh of dismay was her admission.

Lelia started for the door.

"Please, Mrs. Savage—"

"It's Miss Savage," she said brutally. "Didn't you know my child was a bastard?"

The vicar's wife grabbed her arm, her tone urgent. "Try and understand. George and I have only recently come from Lambeth—a poor and ugly parish. Amberley is a joy to us. He cannot risk alienating the

Marchioness and her family. They have powerful friends both in Kent and Sussex."

"When are they going to arrest me?" Lelia asked dully.

The woman's face was mottled. "After the burial."

"And it means prison, I suppose?" she whispered.

"How can you escape it?"

"Stephen is dead . . . only he could save me."

Mrs. Meachum, in a frenzy, dragged her to the door. "You must go now. Perhaps you can get a carriage to London. The trains may still be running, but go, my dear, go!" And she slammed the door behind her visitor.

Finding herself in the dark, on the vicarage front steps, Lelia had no idea what to do. Nothing could tempt her back to her house. Anyway, it was now a trap. Guards would be posted to take her into protective custody. All she wanted was her little child . . . What had they done with him? Who would watch by him in the night? Suddenly, she remembered the sexton's outbuilding in the churchyard where coffins were sometimes stored until the ceremony, if no rites were held in the home or if the body lay unclaimed. Such was the case of a suicide some months before. Surely, David's body must have been released by now. . . .

In the awful darkness, Lelia felt her way down the path to the front gate, then made a sharp right and walked on straight, clinging to the yew hedge to steady her progress until she reached the churchyard. A stone wall replaced the hedge, and she followed this until a gap in the wall and the feel of iron told her she had reached the gate and the main footpath into the churchyard. Beyond lay the church, the castle ruins, and Amberley Wild Brooks.

Stone pebbles kept her on the path, which led eventually to the building. There was no moon. But she and David had run by this yard so many times and walked among the gravestones, that she knew every inch of this ground. With fingers like steel, she tore at the door. Had it resisted, she would have seized a marble

slab to break it down, but it opened without difficulty. The sexton, always in his cups, neglected small matters like locks.

She began to weep. "David, where are you? What have they done to you?"

Slowly moving around the room, Lelia stumbled against a table with something resting on it. Something so small, it could only be her baby's coffin. God! She couldn't open it. They had nailed it down. In rage, she began to beat on it, sobbing hysterically. A noise behind made her spin about. Someone was in the room with her. Light shone in her face, stunning her.

"Mrs. Savage, is that you?"

She recognized her gardener's voice. "Sam, can you help me?"

"What are you doing here, ma'am? You oughtn't to be by yourself. We thought you were with Reverend Meachum."

"I was—" Bitterness tinged her laugh. "But they can't afford to harbor a thief."

"A thief, ma'am? What you be talking about?"

"You remember when Lord Hunt gave me that set of diamonds?"

His smile was broad. "Oh, yes, ma'am, and you looked like the queen!"

She grimaced. "His wife accuses me of stealing them."

He gaped at her in shock, and she began to cry helplessly.

"Please," she begged, "open up the coffin so that I can say goodbye to my child."

Obedying her, Sam Blakely stood quietly aside.

Cradling David in her arms, Lelia Savage gave way to the most terrible grief she had ever known. Only snatches of nursery rhymes that she sang to the dead child kept her sane. Caresses fell on his sweet face and small body. . . .

"Sam," she called faintly, when her sobs finally eased. "What do they say he died of?"

"Natural, ma'am," he said.

"Accidental drowning?" Her voice was very clear.

At his vigorous nod, the questioning was pursued. "Who saw him?"

"The police . . . the doctor," he muttered. "The constable's wife dressed him."

Tenderly gazing at her boy's sleeping face, Lelia cried, "Help me, Sam, I must look at him. I want to examine his body." Overriding his protests, she spoke sharply, "Hold the lamp closer. I need a good look." Undressing him with steady fingers, she first examined his torso—not a mark on him. Then she turned him over on his stomach. There they were—scratches, abrasions on his neck, and an ugly bruise on his back—as if he'd been punched into the water and then held down.

"And this is the child who fell in accidentally," Leila breathed. "Dear Jesus."

"Everyone's against you, ma'am. You must see that."

"Yes, I can see that very well," she replied, buttoning up David's suit. "Why did you follow me?"

"I came to take the watch and saw you turn in here, ma'am."

Her eyes blurred. "How good you are . . ." Kissing David's cold, sweet forehead, she laid him gently in his oak bed and placed his little bear in his arms.

"Good night, little one . . ."

Stepping back, she said flatly, "Close it up now, please."

At the sound of the first nail, Lelia crept out of the building, cursing the darkness as she ran down the path, bruising her hands on the iron gate in her fumbling attempt to open it. Behind her, Sam's lantern wavered, and his voice cried out to others in the night, who answered. Tiny lights flashed in the distance.

Out on the main path, she again felt for the stone wall to guide her past the church . . . then beyond to the castle ruins. Turning left, Lelia took a deep breath and headed for the water-meadows. Sounds nearby spurred her into a run. A rock lay in her path, and she

slipped and fell. On her feet, she was off again. Lumbering after her came Sam, shouting as he ran down the embankment to the fields. Now, she was running swiftly, as if guided by her dead child. In the distance, a low murmur of water. Enough to kill David. Enough for her.

Strong hands gripped her as she waded into the water. Fighting like a mad woman, she screamed, but a hand stopped her cry, a voice hissing in her ear, "Hush, Mrs. Savage! Now, you don't want to alert the police, do you?"

Sam appeared with his lantern, and Lelia saw that the man holding her was one of his sons.

"For God's sake, let me go!" she sobbed. "What I do with my life is my concern. Have you no pity?"

"To let you be a suicide?" Sam asked. "No, ma'am. Think of the master—think of Lord Hunt. Would he like you carrying on like this?"

And for the first time she wept for Stephen—not out of any real love, but because she missed him and was so desperately frightened.

"Shall we take her home, Dad?"

"Yes, she'll be quiet now."

Slowly, they walked Lelia back to their cottage, not caring if a thief spent the night with them. Em Blakely, her former cook, gave her a warm bath, a hot supper, and put her to bed in their room. Tucking in the blankets, she asked, "Anything I can do for you, ma'am?"

Lelia nodded. "Can you pack a valise of clothes for me, and bring one of David's suits? Also, there's something else—" She grabbed her hand. "Money. There's a purse hidden behind a picture in the child's room. Get that, please."

"Of course, ma'am." She smiled. "Sam and I'll go, and leave you in our son's protection. His cousin, James Wells, is here, too. You'll be safe with them. They'll keep the police away."

Mercifully, she slept, while the Blakelys were on

their errand. Voices broke into her disturbed sleep. Em Blakely handed her the valise and purse.

"The money was safe enough, ma'am, but all your things have been ripped up. I've never seen anything like it. All your lovely dresses—these were the only things I could find—even the baby's things destroyed. Just this little gown was all I could salvage, ma'am."

It was a cotton gown he'd worn as a nursling. Turning her head into the pillow, Lelia wept.

"We can get you away from this, if you're strong and do just as we say," Em spoke urgently. "We know you didn't steal those jewels, ma'am, but it'll be the devil to prove, so Sam and I have come up with an idea."

Sick and dazed, Lelia stared at her.

"Our boy Tim, who got you out of the meadows, is a good lad. So's his cousin, and they'll help you escape. Now, listen very carefully, Mrs. Savage." She sat beside her on the bed. At the funeral, you must sit in the front pew with Tim and James on either side of you. They'll help you up the hillside to the burial site. There's a hedge at the top, and beyond that is the road leading out of Amberley. Sam will have three horses waiting. The important thing is—" She held up a warning finger. "Don't let the police get next to you. Stay close to Tim and James. When the ceremony's done, my boys will pull you up to the horses. You must run as fast as possible. We don't know how many police there are, but everyone's certain you won't be served with the warrant until after the child's buried." Em Blakely gave her a stern look. "Now, do you think you can do that?"

Lelia's eyes filled with tears. "No, I can't promise you anything."

"You're not going to do that little boy any good rotting in some filthy prison," Em muttered, stroking her face with gentle hands. "One day you'll find another man and he'll be good to you—better than Lord Hunt was—and this awful grief will go. I've lost a few babies myself."

"But I'm barren," cried the young woman wretchedly. "There will be no more."

"One day, you'll find a man, lass, who will quiet the grief. And then you'll fall in love."

"How did you know I didn't . . .?" Lelia breathed.

"Fond of him you grew, but never in love. But it will come . . . to such a one as you it will come . . . a great love—"

5.



FEARING that Lelia Savage might harm herself if left alone, Em Blakely sat by her all night, while her sons kept watch over the dead child. A cup of steaming tea awakened the young woman to life, followed by a hearty breakfast.

Gently persuading her to eat, Em laughed. "You can't ride a horse on an empty stomach, ma'am."

Then Em helped Lelia dress and bind up her hair into a chignon. That chore done, she held out a tumbler containing a dram of clear pungent liquid. The odor turned Lelia's stomach.

"I don't drink," she said tightly.

"You're going to need it. Will power's not enough today."

"I have something else—hatred."

Appalled by the expression in the brown eyes, Em recoiled. "You're so young, ma'am. Don't let this tragedy embitter you. Think how loving the boy was . . ."

"You've been so good—" Coolly digging in her purse, Lelia extracted a five-pound note and thrust it into her hand.

Shaking her head, Em handed it back. "No, ma'am, we'll not be needing that. Lord Hunt was generous, and you'll be needing it yourself."

"Will you use it for David's grave?" the mother begged.

"The poor little lamb will be looked after as if he were one of my own. Now, don't fret yourself."

One of Em's daughters, waiting for them in the yard, held out a bouquet of flowers. Lelia stared at them stupidly.

"For the baby, ma'am. They're from your garden." Flowers for the dead. . . .

Lelia Savage left that warm haven for the coldly beautiful Church of St. Michael, which was packed with the curious, the hostile, and a few kind souls who stretched out a comforting hand. James went before and Tim came behind. She was grateful for their protection when she spotted the constable, all of his men, and some strangers, who must have been sent from the Kent constabulary.

Ahead of her, stood David's coffin—so small that it suddenly reminded her of the packing case her big doll had come in when she was a child. Giving Tim the bouquet, she embraced the oak casket, kissing and caressing it tenderly with her fingers. Hearing her call the child by name and fearing an outburst, James touched her shoulder. Mechanically, she took the flowers and placed them over David's heart. Turning, Lelia looked into a mass of shocked, smug, and leering faces. Their contempt gave her the courage she needed.

Mr. Meachum's intoning of the burial service accompanied her own inner, tormenting monologue. She killed . . . killed . . . killed him. Killed David, my son. Murderess. Murderess . . . Inexplicably, there flew into her dazed brain a picture of Jared Stoner, and another voice joined hers. Her mother's fearful litany began building into a screaming crescendo, which tore apart her mind. In a spasm of loathing, Lelia gripped the pew, her lips moving not in prayer but in words of vengeance. Just as she swore revenge on that bed of

shame where all those men had raped her, so now she swore eternal revenge on her dead child's body. Tobias Stoner was dead but Jared Stoner was alive. Alive. The architect of her evil fate. One day, she thought dully, I will not only destroy his family and Richmond Hill—I will kill him. I will kill Jared Stoner.

Lelia tried to focus on the casket, but the memory of that fresh, innocent face with the golden curls was obliterated by the satanic darkness of Jared Stoner's face. Tim and James had to assist her to her feet, she was in such a stupor. Skillfully, they eased her down the aisle, ahead of the police phalanx.

Bewildered, blinking in the sunlight, Lelia stepped into one of those exquisite spring days for which Sussex is renowned. A child called "Mommy" and she reached for his hand. . . .

"Are you all right?" Em asked anxiously, embracing her.

"Of course," she said woodenly.

Em's menfolk helped Lelia down the steps, through the gate, and into the churchyard. Faintness engulfed her like a miasma. She could tell from their nervous glances that they feared she was going to have a breakdown.

At the graveside, while Mr. Meachum waved his hand and mouthed words, Lelia heard Dr. Hardin say, *You have a fine baby boy, Mrs. Savage.*

"Let me see him," she said, hurrying forward, Tim and James supporting her. At sight of the pathetic coffin resting in its dirt bed, Lelia's mouth opened in horror. Sharp pains hit her abdomen and breasts. At her anguished cry, the two men kept her from falling. One of them thrust a little shovel into her hand.

"You can't throw dirt on a baby," she muttered furiously.

With a quick movement, the man tossed the soil onto the casket, and she heard it land with the sound of utter finality. Her heart snapped. James pushed something under her nose, and the stinging smell of ammonia brought Lelia to her senses.

"Oh, God! David . . . David forgive me!" she moaned.

Again, came the ammonia. "Can you make it?" James asked under his breath.

She nodded, tears streaming down her face.

Mr. Meachum opened and closed his large mouth in the concluding prayer, and Tim hissed in Lelia's ear, "Run!"

Seizing her hand, James dragged her up the hill. Behind, came a startled murmur and angry shouts from the police. Em and Sam Blakely, with some of their friends, were creating a disturbance to help the escapees.

The hillside seemed endless. They ran in and around tombstones, tripping over roots. Lelia thought her arm would be torn out of the socket. Reaching the hedge, James vaulted across and Tim lifted her over to him. Nearby stood the horses, one of them bearing her valise.

Boosting Lelia onto a horse, Tim shouted, "Follow James, I'm right behind you."

She nodded weakly and they set off, whipping the horses into a gallop. Around them, the sweeping fields were unfolding after the winter's stress; the Common was ripe with yellow gorse; and primroses twinkled in the hedgerow. The scene which once had brought joy to her heart now shattered it. She felt as if her soul had been torn out of her and shredded into the wind.

Riding for hours, Lelia's hands blistered and cracked, and she grew to detest the smell of horses. First, they went south through the downland valley to Arundel. They trotted up the main street, a steep hill to Arundel Castle's southern gateway. People stared—the horses were skittish and they were a nervous and ill-matched trio. It was just the effect needed. A woman on the run would either head for London or one of Sussex's cities, the Blakelys reasoned, and many witnesses would vouch for her being seen in Arundel.

They took the road to Chichester, arrived at its out-

skirts, then detoured north for Petworth. By this time Lelia's hands were bleeding, but the pain and sheer effort needed to stay on the wretched beast kept her from thinking about her son's poor little body and Stoner.

Finally, she could stand it no longer. Bringing her horse to a halt, she slid off the animal and stumbled down a path. Hearing their horses turn back, she pressed herself deep into the hedgerow, trying to hide. But they saw her.

James jumped down from his horse, looking apologetic. "Ma'am, we've got to get you away from the police."

"I don't care anymore. Just don't make me get on that animal again," she pleaded.

An open flask was shoved to Lelia's mouth, and holding her tightly, he made her take three good swallows. "That'll help the pain. Now, you must trust us. Otherwise, you'll go to prison."

"It makes no difference," she said wearily.

Tim joined his cousin and the two men held a brief conversation. A length of rope was suddenly flung over her wrists.

At her feeble cry of alarm, Tim spoke urgently, "Mrs. Savage, if this is the only way we can get you on that horse, then it has to be done. We'd take you up behind one of us, but the animals can't carry two and cover ground quickly."

James looked into her horrified face. "It's to protect you if you faint, ma'am."

Stunned, Lelia let them lead her back to the horse, silently watching as her hands and feet were bound to the saddle and stirrups. Of course, they were right. She did faint, and that rope kept her from falling. Occasionally, they stopped to bathe her face and hands, give her a bit of food, or a sip of that foul liquor. On and on, the hellish ride continued through villages, hamlets, and market towns. At Midhurst, they had a fright—narrowly avoiding a large foot patrol of police. Abruptly, the horses were turned around, and the trio

galloped into the surrounding countryside of West Sussex.

Twilight had given way to pitch-black night. Their destination was James' home in South Harting, and he knew these roads blindfolded. Tim's small lantern made him laugh in derision. But Lelia was in no laughing mood. Blind fear gripped her, of a kind that she hadn't felt since her week in the London brothel. Forgetting their journey's purpose, David slipped out of her mind as she sank into a cold limbo of terror . . . frightened of her escorts, of the alien world she was entering, and crazed with the idea that they were going to kill her. . . .

"She's not doing well, Jimmy," Tim said. "How much longer?"

"Not far. Just over Harting Hill. . . ."

A bright glare splintered Lelia's eyes, and a woman's voice said, "My, my! She looks very sick, poor creature." A hand touched her and something exploded in her ears. Screaming, she fell into a black void.

Of the weeks following, Lelia remembered very little. She was critically ill with a delirium bordering on mania. Brain fever, opined the doctor; but Ginny Wells thought it was grief working itself out in a ravaged mind and body. And then one day the fever abated, only to be followed by an alarming apathy; although conscious, Lelia made no effort at communication. For a fortnight, no one knew if her sight, hearing, or brain had been affected. Death was her preoccupation. She felt dead. Why was she still alive? Lying in that rude bed, thinking about David, she knew her spirit was burnt up. A rag, a bone, and a hank of hair were all she had left.

Muslin sheets scratching against her cheek and a rose by her bedside brought her back to reality.

"A moss rose!" Lelia said aloud. "I haven't seen one since I was a child." And she wondered why the image should be so disturbing.

The woman in the room smiled at her. "Would you like to have it?"

Quickly, Lelia shook her head, and her companion introduced herself: Ginny Wells, mother of James and Em Blakely's sister. Their fears about her safety were well-founded, she added. Police inquiries had been made in London, the port cities, and all the large Sussex towns. Lady Hunt was sparing no expense to effect a capture. However, a humble farmer's cottage seemed an unlikely hideout for a woman of her background. If disaster struck, they would slip her across the border into Hampshire. Meanwhile, she was welcome to stay as long as she wanted.

Lelia learned astonishing things in this talk. That it was early July, which meant she had slept through her twenty-second birthday. And outwardly—despite her illness—she was unchanged. The small, badly tarnished mirror reflected blonde hair—not grey or white as she had feared; and an unlined face with no sign of despair in the eyes or bitterness about the mouth. It would take months for her to realize that she was still in a state of shock and the grief was lying dormant. Surfacing, it would take a new, subtle form—a haunting quality. As for Jared Stoner, he had gone out of her mind like a will-o'-the-wisp. Lelia Savage had forgotten the beauty of her enemy's face, the existence of Richmond Hill. She fell into a deep sleep of forgetfulness.

For months she lived with that kind family in the Western Downs, who treated her as kin. Knowing her history, they did not criticize but let her talk at will, each day giving her strength. From Ginny Wells and her daughter, Sara, Lelia received nothing but kindness.

One day she wanted to get out of bed, and then came the day when she climbed down the steep, ladder-like stairs to the kitchen. It was midsummer before she reached the front door of the cottage, and she laughed like a child taking its first steps. Next, came short walks about the farm, then little ambles which led to longer

ones in the village and countryside. Always, someone accompanied her—not as a guardian, but as friend; and the trust in their eyes banished the foolish, fearful thought occasionally flitting across her mind. With their love, she laid her little child to rest.

Her comforters lived on the outskirts of South Harting in an old cottage with a Tudor chimney-stack crowning a steeply thatched roof, and whitewashed walls. Floors and beams were of beautiful Sussex oak. Small, uneven casement windows peeped out into an old-fashioned garden, and a crooked path twisted its way to the front gate. Beyond, stretched the farm fields, meandering hedges, and a wattle way rutted with the heavy hoofs of plough horses.

Inside, there was plenty of room for the strays who turned up day and night to take a meal, chat, or pour out a grief. It was unusual to find the kitchen or parlor absent of people, and Ginny was always lending her washhouse to a housewife who couldn't make do with a lean-to scullery. Many occupants had slept in the upstairs bedrooms, and would continue to do so after Lelia's departure.

John Wells came from a prosperous line of farmers, but like many, his fortunes had waned and the property had been cut up, leaving only a charming cottage and the enclosing land. Taking his reverses in good stride, Wells had taken a job as carter on one of the big farms. Gradually, his children joined him. James, too, was a carter, and sometimes at night Lelia heard the creak of wagon wheels and watched the bobbing lantern as the wagon rolled by.

No money would they take from her, now a cherished friend. So she helped around the ancient house, picked flowers and vegetables from the gardens, and watched Ginny Wells at her endless sewing and mending of other people's lives.

Summer ended . . . autumn came. Lelia Savage continued to drift. Ginny's daughter, Sara, married a strapping young farmer in the great church with the copper spire in South Harting. When the rapturous

young couple kissed, Lelia looked away in shame at witnessing such intimacy between two people in love. Ironically, in some ways she was as naive as a spinster. Such a kiss was unknown to her.

Autumn slipped through her fingers. November frosts and darkness were upon them. In seven months, she would be twenty-three years old. One afternoon, Lelia sat on her bed counting and recounting her money, wondering what in God's name she was going to do with her life.

"There's a position open at the Hall." Ginny Wells bustled in cheerfully.

Lelia looked up. "Doing what?"

"Governess to the girls."

Her smile was bleak. "I'm afraid my credentials are unsuitable."

Moving around the bed, Ginny checked the edges of the worn counterpane to see if it needed mending. "Mrs. Savage, it seems to me you've earned the right to fib a bit." She spoke in a low, sweet voice. "Whatever may have happened in London, you're still a lady and you need the money. Just say you're a widow, who's lost her child and needs work. You'll get hired."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I sew for Mrs. Martin. I know. It's worth a try, isn't it?" Taking her by the shoulders, she added, "You don't want to go back to London, do you?"

Lelia shuddered. "No."

"Good. I thought not. Now, Mrs. Martin is a shy and quiet lady, the three girls are sweet, but you've got to watch out for Mr. Martin. He fancies himself a ladies' man, and one look at you is going to send him roaring. Luckily, he works in London and is away most of the time."

"Why are you so good to me?" her guest asked curiously.

"I didn't like what had been done to you. I wanted to help. Just one thing, lamb . . ." She tucked a bone pin into the heavy chignon. "We don't see how you can prove anything. Oh, the jewels are nothing . . . It's

the boy—"Lelia's face had gone very white, and she caressed it thoughtfully. "Don't let it make you bitter, or it'll eat your heart away like a cancer."

"I never think about it," she lied.

"You do, and that's what worries me . . . you won't talk about it."

"Don't you think I should be done with grief?" Lelia asked with some heat.

"But something's behind it." She looked puzzled. "Not only the boy. Something else . . ."

Quite honestly not remembering, her reply was cool. "I don't know what you mean."

A smiling Ginny Wells threw up her hands, and gave her guest a warm hug.

There are ugly houses, beautiful ones, and middling. The Hall—more properly speaking The Downs, because many of its rooms overlooked that part of the countryside—was of recent vintage and decidedly ugly. A house that fancied itself a Gothic castle, with wings sprouting in a half-dozen directions, and a jumble of turrets and battlements bursting into the sky—it jarred the senses at each glance. Inside, sets of expensive furniture clashed, colors and fabrics rioted; and the paintings and bric-a-brac were atrocious. Fascinated by such grotesquery, Lelia, in her spare time, would traipse through the rooms as if at some Awful Museum, gazing, awe-struck, at all the mistakes. It even made her laugh a bit. With less money and more sense, something might be made of it.

But that was Mrs. Martin's concern, and the least of her worries. A petite woman with plain features, she might have been pretty had she been able to banish a constant frown, a trembling lower lip, and tears which sprang too easily to red-rimmed eyes. The cause of her unhappy confusion in appearance and toilette was John Martin, Esq., her spouse, who did business in the City—what exactly, Lelia was never privileged enough to find out. Wines and spirits, most likely.

Fortunately, they were not often blessed with his presence.

Mr. Martin was an odious man, whose florid good looks were turning flacid and were not helped by a walrus moustache, which neither inspired trust nor embellished his crafty eyes and rapacious mouth. Under normal circumstances, Lelia might have judged him a comic figure—his silly way of walking reminded her of a windup toy—but she soon came to realize he was not a comedian but a menace. Not only did he make his wife miserable with his infidelities, but he frightened his mouselike daughters with petty cruelties. Luckily for Lelia, he wore high-heeled boots (to enhance his short stature), and as he marched briskly down the uncarpeted oak floor corridors, the clack-clack of his shoes warned her to make an escape. Every young female in the household was fair game when John Martin, Esq., was in residence. Nightly, bolts could be heard slamming in bedroom doors against a sudden visit.

When the master was away, life was fairly agreeable. Lelia reveled in the boredom and the solitude of a simple existence with three young girls. She taught them everything Mary Quigley had taught her long ago, but they were neither bright nor interested in learning. It became a great coup to make one memorize a poem or conjugate a French verb. And when the beauty of a flower or a sunset excited comment, that was a big step indeed. Lelia took each day at a time, telling herself it was only a beginning and from it she would go on to something much better. One day, she would find her bright pupil. Nothing more did she ask out of life.

On Christmas morning, Lelia awoke expecting David to jump into bed with her to recount his latest dream—a never varying ritual. Snuggling under the blankets, he would whisper, “I dreamed . . . then I dreamed . . .” and one glory after another would follow. But today was different. Too much excitement waiting under a tree to spare for a dream. Smiling, she held out her arms. . . .

Remembering, she huddled in the bedclothes, weep-

ing. A thin, high wail pierced the air, horrifying her. Not since his death had she cried like that.

"Oh, God! Why didn't you let me die? Why did you leave me to this misery?" she sobbed.

The skivvy with morning tea interrupted her anguish, and Lelia forced herself to get up and dress. Naturally, she couldn't survive the day without some pain. She ought to have known better, but worse was to come.

In a distraught state, she took the wrong staircase to go downstairs, finding herself in a totally unknown, carpeted passageway. Suddenly, John Martin appeared and bore down upon her with alarming speed, his moustache a-quiver with excitement. Trying to dodge him, Lelia was engulfed in a bearlike embrace as he attempted to plant a wet kiss on her mouth. Still moving, she caught him off balance and sent him crashing to the floor.

Puffing and gasping, he swore at her: "By God, you'll be sorry for this!"

A quick glance showed her that he was unhurt, and she darted out of the corridor, shaken and dismayed, to find her charges. No one had seen their encounter, and Lelia hoped he might overlook it. Apparently, he did. While all the family and relatives were gathering in the morning room, before entering in a procession to view the tree and open presents, Mr. Martin grinned at her in an amiable fashion. As the drawing room doors opened, the little children shot forward, followed by the older ones, with the adults and servants bringing up the rear. Sipping a cup of punch at the far end of the room, Lelia tried desperately not to think of her last Christmas with David. Up sidled the lord and master.

"Bitch!" he hissed.

Turning, she looked out of a window, her eyes smarting with tears. It was impossible to escape her past life. No severity of dress or hair could hide or transform her into what she was not. Now this man was going to plague her life and shatter her small happiness.

"I'll get you," he snarled. "You just wait."

John Martin ruined not only that day, but all the days following with his obscene remarks and fumbling hands. Only when he went back to London did Lelia breathe a sigh of relief. It was respite enjoyed only until his return and a new round of dodges and pursuit. Months later the inevitable happened—Mrs. Martin caught her husband pawing the governess in the library. Lelia was banished to the morning room while the couple argued for well over an hour. A swish of skirts announced Mrs. Martin's arrival. Penning a swift letter at her secretary, she stuck it into an envelope. Then, she counted out some coins on the deskfront.

"Your wages, Mrs. Savage, and a letter of referral—"

Not for anything would she stay on, Lelia thought, but the world outside seemed very formidable.

"I'm sorry—"

"There's nothing to discuss. Just go, please. One of the coachmen will drive you to the village."

Taking the sovereigns and the note in icy hands, Lelia glanced at the reddened eyes, the swollen nose, and the hopeless air of discontent.

"You're so goddamned pretty," Mrs. Martin muttered viciously, glaring at her. "Get the hell out of here!"

Shocked by her vehemence, Lelia fled to her room and packed. Within ten minutes, she had left The Downs. Booking a room at the White Hart Inn, she walked to the Wells' cottage. One look at her face and Ginny Wells knew what was wrong.

"He's been at you, eh?"

She nodded.

"Well, don't feel badly. The man's a goat. No one stays there long." She put on a kettle of water for tea. "Did she give you a nice reference?"

"Just that I'd worked for her . . . qualifications listed—" Her voice shook. "No character reference . . ."

Ginny gave a cluck of dismay.

"I'll have to go back to London."

"No, dear, you mustn't do that."

Ignoring her protest, Lelia walked over to a large brass plate hanging on the wall, kept so well shined she could see her reflexion. Nothing showed on her face. Nothing. Pretending to fix her hair, she murmured, "Don't worry, I've a bit of money. I'll find something decent."

"Why not stay in Sussex? Try another village."

"I'm afraid of the police," she confessed. "Even if I changed my name, they have a good description and, unfortunately, I stand out in a crowd."

Inspired by a new idea, Ginny's frown of worry dissolved. "Why not move to Hampshire?"

Lelia shook her head. "I must go back to London." And then she felt the oddest sensation—a rose pressed against her breast, a hand caressing her head. "I'm waiting for something . . . someone."

"Who?" the older woman looked bewildered.

"I don't know," Lelia replied, staring at her hand where she felt the distinct impression of a kiss. "Something I must do, but I can't remember . . . since my illness." With a smile, she snapped out of the somber mood. "It's not a ghost, I assure you."

"You cried for someone when you were ill," Ginny whispered.

"My son?" The color drained from her face. As Ginny shook her head, Lelia added, "Lord Hunt?"

"No, it's no name I've ever heard you mention, and you never spoke of him again."

"Dreams . . . fancies!" Lelia scoffed. "It's of no consequence. I was delirious." She laughed lightly. "Now come and wish me luck. I'm off to a new life."

6.



1883. Summer. Lelia Savage arrived in London, again settling in the West End, this time in Weymouth Street. Home became a small, musty room in a nondescript house, as she began picking up the threads of her life in a desperate attempt to forget the past. A decent job was just around the corner, she told herself, not a whit bothered by a lack of references. The young are not easily intimidated, and something good would happen—the nightmare was over.

Money was short, but soon, to her dismay, Lelia learned that without a referral, chances of obtaining a good job were extremely limited. The idea of forging a letter or two and seeking another governess position never occurred to her; the pitfalls of that world seemed formidable, and she preferred anonymity in London. An assortment of low-paying jobs turned up: a few drapers' shops, a modiste, but the dismissal always came after several weeks. Either Lelia's appearance would make a jealous woman clerk complain, or bring unwelcome attentions from the men; or she was simply dropped with other girls when the work was slack. And all about her, wherever she looked—on the streets, in carriages, stores, and public houses—she saw an alternative solution. A vile one. She became frantic. She just wasn't making enough money to survive in this neighborhood, and the thought of leaving appalled her. She cut out one meal a day, and then after a week dropped a second.

In late August, on one of the hottest days of the

year, after being rejected for seven odd jobs and almost fainting in the street, Lelia made a decision. Sick at heart, she went to the nearest pawnshop and sold a gold chain she had worn in Sussex as "Mrs. Savage." She spent no money for food. Instead she purchased some provocative undergarments, a saucy hat adorned with white doves' feathers, a dainty pair of shoes, and a Promenade green silk dress with a tight bodice, three-quarter-length sleeves, and a skirt draped over a large bustle. The effect was charming and blatant. No lady would wear such an outfit. Returning to Weymouth Street, she bathed, dressed herself with great care, and quietly sneaked out of her respectable bastion. Move, she must. No other option existed.

Lelia walked all the way to St. James's Square, enduring the stink of the crowded, dirty streets, avoiding familiarities from passing men, and turning aside from the virtuous, who gaped at her as if she were a leper. Walking as a whore was a new experience. Riding in Stephen's crested landau had spoiled her, and she wasn't used to strangers slyly pawing her. However, hunger kept her moving, as the blush of shame turned to a glare of rage. Climbing the curved staircase to the house with the red door, she felt the old hatred seep into her heart.

Luckily, Christine Marshall was at home to receive her former protégée in the pale yellow drawing room. The two women sized one another up, then Lelia explained her plight.

"My dear, I only wish I could help you." She made a moue. "A woman with your attributes is always welcome—if pregnancy hasn't marred your figure—" Forcing her to stand, she ran an expert hand over her body. Laughing softly, she added, "No, you carry yourself well. Any stretching?"

Lelia shook her head.

"Good." Smiling, she caressed the young woman's face, then waved her back to the chair. "Unfortunately, there's the problem of Lady Hunt."

"She has nothing to do with me."

Amusement shone in the flat eyes. "My dear, you did the unforgivable. You shouldn't have borne his child."

Lelia was getting hot with anger. "He ordered me to."

A sigh came from Mrs. Marshall. "Such a flurry would never have occurred with a girl, but you had to have a boy."

"Which she murdered—" Lelia's voice trembled and she drew out a handkerchief.

"I don't think you can prove that, can you?" Mrs. Marshall handed her a glass of sherry, which she took gratefully—no need to fear it was drugged—and drank deeply.

"You bore him a son and his wife will never forgive you. He could protect you only while he was alive. Never forget that, my dear. Men die and leave wives, and the mistress must be prepared for that eventuality." Her look was piercing. "Did you steal the parure?"

"No! No, he gave it to me . . ."

"I never thought you a thief. Unfortunately, others do, and Lady Hunt, the aggrieved widow, has many friends. Even the Marquis's associates side with her in this matter. The child's birth was thought rash, and you've been made the scapegoat."

A tear ran down Lelia's cheek. "The child is dead . . ." she cried dully.

"The child is nothing, Lelia—"

"I can't have any more. I'm barren."

Christine Marshall paused, shaken, perhaps, by the misery she was witnessing. Then she began to stride back and forth, saying brightly, "Well, that's a step in the right direction. Should make you a very valuable mistress. I was wrong to let you go, but he paid me a handsome sum, and frankly, I thought he'd send you back . . ." She shrugged. "Had you stayed here, your future would be assured—"

"Please—" Lelia begged, loathing herself for this final betrayal. "Take me back. I have no money—"

She laughed, not unkindly. "My dear, I would very

much like to have you. A number of my clients would love to get their hands on you, but I can't. I dare not make an enemy of Lady Hunt. Sooner or later the word's bound to reach her. I can't even send you over to Mary Jeffries—we share the same clientele. You'll just have to free-lance."

Speaking very slowly and distinctly as if to a simpleton, Lelia repeated, "I have no money. I live in a respectable house. They know nothing of my kind. I can't bring a man back." It was like talking to a brick wall. Beside herself with anxiety, Lelia sprang to her feet, imploring the woman, "Help me, please!"

Studying her, Mrs. Marshall's eyes went cold and hard, turning her face into a chilling mask. A long moment of silence ensued. Looking at her nails, she said softly, "Very well, Lelia, there is one job you could do. Never a favorite with the girls. A flagellant. If the mood's upon him, he'll flog you, too. We have a machine set up in the black room, with every type of instrument from the birch to the cat o'nine tails. And you're watched, in case he gets violent."

Lelia flinched.

"Is that what you want?" Mrs. Marshall asked cruelly.

God, how I loathe her, Lelia thought. Quite easily, she could have gone up and wrung her elegant neck. But she controlled herself.

"What choice have I?" Her voice as cool as the madam's. "Give me enough money for new lodgings and I'll do whatever you want."

"Whatever . . . I . . . want?" she asked with a brilliant smile.

Too late, Lelia saw her terrible mistake. A refusal and she would be thrown out. Playfully, like a cat teasing a mouse, Mrs. Marshall strolled over and took off Lelia's hat. Trying to hide her fear and revulsion, the young woman met her eyes and smiled.

"Good girl!" she breathed, kissing her. "I've waited a long time for you," and she flicked her tongue over her lips.

Two dreadful nights in that house again broke Lelia's despairing heart. It was astonishing to find that she was still vulnerable. But the money earned from those filthy encounters, plus a necessary introduction from Mrs. Marshall, secured her a drawing-room floor in popular Queen Street. Lelia was lucky—depending on one's view—to take over the rooms from a successful prostitute, whose high earnings kept her in luxurious surroundings, but whose propensity for drink undermined her talents. Thus, when she was rudely booted out, the landlady retained all her expensive furnishings, which freed Lelia to invest her earnings on a costly wardrobe. In addition to landing in a bijou nest, she received cleaning services, a ladies' maid, and meals. Liquor was readily available. The one house rule was decorum. Tenants were encouraged to invite discreet guests at certain hours of the day and night—"our friends," as they were dubbed. Naturally, the price for all this extravagance was very high. Rents were exorbitant. But Paradise is not cheap.

Lelia Savage moved unseeing in her new world, abhorring it and despising herself for capitulating. But the alternative of living in squalor as a low-class prostitute was a grim one. What matter if her eyes were beginning to look as flat as Christine Marshall's, if she had enough to eat? Her price was high and she made a good living, choosing her clients very carefully. She picked men who were not of the aristocracy, but of the upper-class establishment—men who desired more intimacy and less confinement than found in a brothel. Men who had money, who weren't diseased, drunken, or perverse. Men who might show a dram of kindness—this is what she sought. Lost to her now was that image of a great love which would bind her for a lifetime. And her little boy's face faded away, as if in shame, driven out by those grotesque figures hovering over her in furtive acts of lust. One night, in numbed terror, she realized her soul was disintegrating. A weeping man poured out his heart, and listening to his lamentations, Lelia judged him a fool, whose life meant

nothing. He went from her bed and stepped in front of a train. Not a twinge of pity did she feel.

Money was her main preoccupation. She charged a steep but fair rate based on a man's income and position. Gifts were discouraged, so that her clients never felt themselves cheated. Many of her associates wrung these men dry. Lelia, remembering her father, had no heart for it. In gratitude, a number of her customers visited her steadily; some even proposed a villa life in St. John's Wood or Brompton, but she refused all offers. Loneliness made her become friends with the people in her profession. Once she overcame the jealousy barrier with the women, who feared her as an interloper in their territory, they got on splendidly, though she could never join them on their drinking bouts. The men she encountered daily—not her customers, but pub owners, tradesmen and laborers—were roughly kind, never abusive, and when the pimps and fancy men started pestering her about protection, they came to her aid. Few women worked alone, but Lelia preferred it that way—a message understood by all when the bully who had been threatening her was beaten up and had his nose slit. No one ever bothered her again.

On working days, Lelia rose at about four in the afternoon. After a large breakfast and a lazy bath, she would dress and saunter out in search of prey. Depending on her luck, she might return immediately with a guest. Sometimes, she went shopping in the Burlington Arcade, a charming glass-roofed bazaar off Piccadilly, and if a good-natured gentleman interpreted her coy signals, they would wend their way upstairs to the gas-lit rooms above the petite shops. Supper and a bottle of champagne would be followed by a romp on the sofa. A Covent Garden coffee house had convenient rooms above, and the odor of mingled fruit and flowers drifted over the entwined couple. More varied and interesting was the night life. Decked out in a lovely gown, Lelia would stroll through the red-carpeted promenades of the theatres or the Opera

house. In a few minutes a man might be at her side—a bit of conversation, a gentle pressure on the leg, and they were a pair. Depending on her mood, she might go to Pall Mall or to St. James's and reconnoiter the clubs, waiting for the members to pour out of those massive edifices. Lower Regent Street was always packed. Lelia didn't much like it, and was resented as being out of her district. Occasionally, a nice man took her arm, and off they went to an oyster shop or a gin palace in Piccadilly Circus. If she liked him, he came home with her. Sometimes, she joined the crush in the Haymarket, with a glitter of gas lamps shining through the mist and the pounding of vehicles jarring one's ears.

This was Lelia Savage's existence, and she got through it, day by day, until Christmas Eve, when she decided quite coldly to kill herself. The enraptured look on tiny children's faces staring into shop and store windows devastated her. She wanted someone to love—it was as simple as that. And to love her. To love her . . .

These thoughts drove her out of her flat and down to the Thames River. Beautiful by day in all its infinite moods, it was this night flat and oppressive, stinking of filth. A thin mist veiled a sickly moon and a few timid stars. On and on, she walked like a sleep-walker, trying to get up enough courage to throw herself in. A cluster of people huddling together in rags, sitting and lying on the embankment, stopped her progress. At sight of them—men, women, and children—Lelia wept. Sleeping under the stars on a bitterly cold night—Christmas Eve. She never knew such misery existed. Grieving and ashamed, she crept back to her palatial abode.

Another year went by. While other girls drank themselves to ruin and death, found steady lovers or husbands, Lelia continued on, perversely scornful of financial or emotional security. Some money she put by, and each month what could be spared went to the

Wells and Blakelys. There was more than enough to keep her in comfort, so that when those spells of depression hit and she couldn't bear a man's touch, it was no hardship to stop work for days or even weeks. Donning a plain dress, she would step outside to mingle with average people, people unacquainted with shadows and terrors. Walking through the greenery of the parks, Lelia tried desperately to remember what she had lost in her life. What so haunted her. What she was looking for. Who he might be. That man—the face in her dreams. Night after night, she cried out for him. And days were spent looking for him in the streets. She knew his face as well as her own, but his name was lost in the ruins of her heart.

One night, she dropped into one of the most famous public houses—a building not easily missed because of the large illuminated clock over the entrance way and a fantastically ornamented parapet. Etched glass with a floral design obscured the huge windows. Chandeliers glittered from the public bar ceiling, red-plush couches ran along the walls, thick carpets softened the footfall, and everywhere one looked was mahogany and glass. Behind the ornately carved bar, a pair of stunning girls, heavily made up and garishly costumed, bantered with some customers.

Sitting at her usual table with a glass of water, Lelia was immediately picked up. A bully and a braggart, she thought to herself. But, lonely and unhappy, she invited him back to Queen Street. He was rich, young, and blond, with hair much lighter than Lelia's, and skin the color of parchment. An athlete, or so he proved himself in bed. Bored, she endured it with a smile. Wearying finally, he fell asleep, and she left the bed not wishing to share it with him. In the early morning after he had dressed, and while Lelia sat at her dressing table brushing her hair, she caught him staring at her in the mirror. A fierce, unnerving glance.

"You were Lord Hunt's mistress, weren't you?" he softly asked.

Counting the strokes, she brushed on, feeling as if

she had been hit in the stomach. "Never heard of him—"

"Oh, yes, you have. I met you once years ago when he was keeping you near Regent's Park. You're not easily forgotten—not with that face and figure." He laughed unpleasantly.

Lelia made herself face him, keeping her voice calm. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His eyes looked the color of the sea gone wild. "His wife's my aunt."

The brush clattered to the floor. Feeling quite faint, Lelia leaned on the table. He stole up behind her and gripped her throat in strong, white hands, chanting, "Lelia . . . Lelia! Golden-haired Lelia!" Rocking her back and forth, he screamed, "Thief . . . thief!"

God, let him go. Let him go! Lelia prayed, hoping that his frenzy would abate, but as she clawed at him, he began beating her with his fists, yelling imprecations. Instantly, she knew this was no sadistic punishment session. This was the real thing. He meant to kill her. Picking up her mirror, she slammed it in his face. The blow startled him and he loosened his grip. Lunging for a bottle of Patchouli cologne, Lelia flung the entire contents into his face. With a shriek of pain he broke away, and she shoved him out of the bedroom, through the drawing room, and into the hall, slamming the door shut on his obscenities.

Fear made her mind cold and hard. She had to move quickly before that madman summoned friends, relatives, the police . . . A fragment of memory dredged up like an old fish. Months before, a charming prostitute friend of hers drunkenly wrote out an address, saying in a slurred voice, "That's the place for hiding, dear, if you run into a rough one. Who would picture you there?" and she had burst into a scream of laughter.

Where was the ragged slip of paper? Lelia's fingers tore through her drawers. There it was—a scrap of salvation—hidden among her finery. Summoning the startled maid, Lelia tossed her some of her finest garments to be packed in a large valise; then coolly

attended to her own dressing. Only the bruised eye bore witness to her attack. Up she went to see the landlady to settle her account, which turned out to be very expensive. Wrathful nobility and Scotland Yard were a menace. Like Paradise, silence was not a cheap commodity.

Lelia paid and paid, watching the bills flow from her purse without a murmur, hating the old harriidan yet not blaming her for extracting every bit of flesh. The grotesquely fat face and hooded vulture's eyes were what had become of a former beauty—one day she, too, might become such a monster.

An hour after the assault, Lelia Savage was riding in a hansom cab to a costumer's in Covent Garden, again on the advice of her drunken friend, Clarissa, who had later been fished out of the Thames. "Never buy secondhand clothes in the shops, love. They're lice-ridden. Get them from actors—at least they're fairly clean!"

Dry-eyed and numb, Lelia watched the costumer rummage through her gorgeous clothes, then silently hand over apparel for a working class girl in exchange. No makeup and an ugly suitcase completed the disguise.

Only in the carriage did she break down. East London. Who, indeed, would think of looking for her there? But her poor dead friend had left a warning: "Watch out! Once you sink to the East End, you don't leave!" A month or two at most, Lelia judged, and I'll be back in the West End. This is just a respite . . .

The horrible din of Whitechapel receded as she arrived at her new home in Stepney. It was amazing that there could be pockets of beauty in the midst of such hell. The house Clarissa had recommended was located on the curving Green, an irregular swatch of common sandwiched between two rows of houses. Some were merely cottages; others, like Lelia's, were more imposing; of Georgian vintage with low brick walls, or iron or woodwork fences separating their forecourts from the Green. A garden studded with pear trees

greeted her, and a warm and homey air permeated the building's exterior and interior. In the shell hood over the front door, a little cherub with a scrubbed nose winked at the passerby.

Fortunately, her landlady, an ex-actress, had room for her—a first floor chamber overlooking the Green. It was small but cosy with a good fireplace, and very clean. While Lelia unpacked her meager belongings, the landlady admonished her: it was safe to walk in Stepney, Whitechapel, and Shoreditch, but on no account was she to venture into Bethnal Green, Ratcliff, or the Docklands. Finally, taking pity on her new guest, she left Lelia alone in her nice immaculate room.

And to her new life. . . .

7.



1885. Winter. It was achingly cold in East London—no more so, perhaps, than in the West End, but appearances encouraged the delusion. In the West End, snow was a delight transforming the landscape into a fairyland; in East London, its charm was so rapidly fouled by soot and garbage as to turn it into a monstrosity. If the snow-covered bundle sprawled in the gutter didn't reek, most likely it was a human being. Broken windows were not replaced, but were stuffed with cardboard, old rags, anything which came to hand. One froze more easily in such an environment.

Lelia's little room could have housed a family—even two, as it often did—and here she was taking up precious space, a spectator of other people's misery.

Shame finally forced her out of her safe haven and gave her courage to join that ugly world.

East London was far worse than she had expected. By night, it haunted her dreams; by day, she could barely stomach it. The awful stench of rotting food, vomit, urine, and excrement; the pitiful sight of the dead and the dying cast down like unwanted dolls in the streets; the drunken men fighting; their mottled-faced women howling from intoxication or beatings; their young children stupefied on penny glasses of gin; the tragic wrecks weaving into doss houses, some of them kicked out late at night because they lacked the few pence for bed; the blind, the beggars, the pox-marked and syphilis-eaten visages of the most unfortunate; the criminals stalking their helpless prey—all this drugged the brain and the heart. Tears of pity soon turned to indifference.

Even more pathetic than the derelicts was the great mass of poor struggling so desperately to keep their families out of the dreaded workhouse. No one could predict disaster, and fear of an accident, slump, or ill-luck led many into crime. Others fought to stay honest. In the most deplorable surroundings, often bare of furniture, they tried to instill in their half-starved children a measure of ambition. The lucky boy studied a trade or went into unskilled work. His sister graduated from matchboxes and flowers to the sugar refineries, the breweries, or the sweat shops. But a pretty, bored girl might enter that world Lelia knew so well.

Surprisingly, a large percentage of East London managed. Not very well, but they had enough to eat, steady work, and lived in sparkling houses—people like Lelia's landlady, some of the costermongers, City clerks, shopkeepers, rentiers, and retired people. They hadn't given up. It was plainly evident in all the care lavished on their dwellings and tiny gardens. A plant in a window represented a defiant spirit. And hope shone, too, in the faces of the girls pouring out of the sweat shops in colorful costumes and large hats, fresh and vibrant in their young beauty as they ran to meet their beaux

among the strong youths of the East End. Time and again, Lelia watched these encounters with a sorrowing heart. They would court, marry, and love passionately, and life would be sweet until the first or second child. Then began the poverty cycle. Before long, if they drank, had too many children or bad luck, they wound up like their parents, hating one another.

Now, Lelia understood what Clarissa meant about not getting out of the East End. One's lungs virtually inhaled apathy. Just staying alive was the prime consideration. A hidden danger, crushing the spirit and sapping the will, was monotony. There were row after row of dirty, grimy houses identical in color and size, relieved only by a Georgian facade, or one of the new blocks of flats looming like a tipsy giant over its tiny neighbors. No wonder sight grew blind. But there were compensations: a raffish gaiety in the markets of Petticoat Lane and Whitechapel Road, and a plucky bonhomie among these poor folk. A pinch of Cockney banter could make the saddest face smile.

For weeks Lelia did nothing but explore, getting acclimated to her surroundings, and trying to overcome her fear and revulsion. At least, for the moment, she was safe from Lady Hunt's persecution, but others had not been so fortunate. The two families befriending her in Sussex had been punished. The Blakelys' cottage was destroyed by fire, and the Wells's lost their livelihood from the big farm. Only Lelia's money kept them out of the workhouse, and rebuilt the ruined home. It comforted her to know that they continued to look after that tiny grave.

But the men were long gone from her bed, and charity had greatly reduced her funds. Musing on her acute financial predicament, Lelia turned into Osborn Street one day and stepped off the curb, vaguely aware of a horse and wagon bearing down upon her. A man's frenzied shouts leaped into her numbed brain, then a terrific blow to the shoulder sent her staggering to the curbside. She fainted. Instantly, the face in her dreams appeared. Behind him stood a great house. Her mother

began to whisper, *Destroy Jared Stoner. Go to Richmond Hill in Norfolk . . . Norfolk . . .* A hand shook her to consciousness and she spoke his name: "Jared Stoner."

But the wrong face looked into hers. A surly-looking young man with a thin, bony face, wicked eyes, a broken nose, and a finely etched mouth.

"Are you all right, miss?" he asked worriedly.

Memories came flooding into her mind of that other man with the terrible beauty—her enemy.

"Yes, of course." She was staring at her palm, where his kiss of long ago lay like a black flower.

Her companion swore softly. "My God, girl, didn't you see that wagon? Another second and you would have been killed."

Jared Stoner . . . Jared Stoner, she murmured to herself in wonder. How could she have forgotten?

"I don't think you hit your head, but you went out like a light." He smiled, showing a streak of kindness under the tough exterior. "Look, my dad and I own the pub around the corner. Come back with me and let me give you some brandy. . . ."

The glass of brandy led to a badly needed offer of a job, and Lelia began work as a barmaid at The Unicorn. It was not so old as the famous Hoop and Grapes, but a nice-enough place with a pleasant atmosphere and stringent rules: no rowdyism, soliciting, or selling of liquor to children. Jack and his father were decent men, and she liked working for them. The hours were long, which permitted no time for brooding about personal problems or the horrors outside, but she had an hour off every afternoon, as well as Sunday afternoons. Most of the heavy work was done by the potboy; her dusting and glass-washing chores were relatively light. And both father and son protected her from any insolent overtures. If she had to work in a public house, she couldn't have found a better one.

Jack had a girl. On Lelia's first night she came in with a mass of curly, reddish-blond hair floating down her back, freckles on a happy, cheerful face. Quite ob-

viously, she worshipped Jack, who was fond of her despite a pretended gruffness. They were engaged and would marry as soon as enough money could be scraped together. Reminded of Sara and her young bridegroom, Lelia found herself envying their happiness, bitterly questioning if she would ever find anything to equal it.

All she had to sustain her was hatred of Jared Stoner.

At last the snow, the fogs, and the cold rains of winter went, and a chilly spring blew into East London. Green touched the hedges, and catkins dropped from trees, as the days grew longer.

One morning while straightening up the public bar, Lelia reached for a paper left behind by a customer and started to toss it out with the rest of the rubbish. An item made her pause, and she sat down with a feeling of dread. One of her paramours—Peter Jermyn, an actor—had been found robbed and beaten to death in a Bristol alley. There were no witnesses.

Dazed with horror, she got through her work, but in the early morning hours in her room, she raged and wept against the injustice of her friend's death. How wicked it was to cut down a life of such promise. Torn by guilt, she cursed herself. She destroyed everything she loved or touched. The Blakelys and Wells nearly ruined . . . David drifting in the water-meadows . . . Peter killed, beaten with an iron pipe. He was a man she'd really been fond of. It hadn't been love, but a deep affection strong enough to bind. And now he was dead. She felt cheated and her hatred of Stoner grew and grew.

Just thinking about Jared Stoner made Lelia smoulder with a passion no kiss had ever aroused. Obviously, hate was stronger than love, she thought with bitter irony. Well, now she knew where he lived. She could not remember in which village, but that name would come in time, and with it a plan as to how she might intrigue her way into his household.

First, she decided she must find a man to get her out of this inferno. Not one of the swells who came down from the West End for a lark—a fly-by-night type—but someone with money who would take her out of East London and set her up where she would be safe from Lady Hunt's wrath. In a new environment, she could think how best to deal with Stoner. It was impossible to make a move here—a place reeking of failure. She would need every ounce of courage she possessed. The spiral of disaster set in motion by Tobias Stoner, when he ruined her father, could only end in death. And she had to be equal to the challenge. . . .

Weeks passed and it was summer. More and more people crowded the sidewalks and the stoops, fleeing their bug-ridden, stifling hovels. Children played tag in the streets, darting between horses and vehicles, while their fathers drank themselves into a stupor on beer and their mothers watched in quiet desperation. Lelia kept looking for her prey. . . .

One night, letting herself into the house at Stepney, she heard sounds coming from the flat opposite hers. Listening at the door, she heard its occupant wailing—great hoarse cries. Inhuman.

"Carrie?" She banged on the door. "It's Lelia. Can I help you? What's the matter?"

Silence, for a long moment. No sound except for the ticking of the hallway clock. Perhaps she's taken home a man who's abusing her, Lelia thought, feeling foolish and rather worried. Again, she knocked. "Let me help you!" she implored.

At last the door opened, a thin sliver. Carrie leaned against the doorjamb, her face a ghastly color. Pushing open the door, Lelia looked beyond into the room. The bed was soaked with blood.

"My God! What happened?"

Carrie's knees gave and she sank to the floor. Hoisting her up, Lelia shut the door.

"Rid of it. I got rid of it . . ." Carrie panted. "I got rid of it, Lelia."

What she was referring to lay on the bed.

Closing her eyes, Lelia fought a wave of dizziness. "Go lie down. I'm going to get a doctor."

The enormous blue eyes swam with tears. "Don't leave me alone, please, Lelia." She clutched her. "I don't want to die."

Lelia spread her cloak out on the bed. "Don't be silly, Carrie. You're a strong girl. You're not going to die." Trying to hide her fright, she eased her friend down onto the garment, then headed for the door. "I'll get Mr. Diggs to call an ambulance. We've got to get you to a hospital."

Carrie's shrieks followed Lelia upstairs. "Don't leave me . . . I don't want to die!"

At times of crisis, Mr. Diggs, the landlady's brother, was a star of the first order. Of a theatrical disposition, he saw drama in the smallest incident, and it needed no urgent entreaty to dispatch him for an ambulance from the London Hospital. Off he went at a speedy trot, while Lelia returned to Carrie's bedside.

The room was a shambles: furniture and bric-a-brac spilled in her agony. Looking about in dismay, Lelia asked, "What did you do it with?"

"There . . ." Carrie pointed a finger toward the washstand.

In the bowl, Lelia saw a bloody knife.

Appalled, she turned to her. "Oh my God, you used a knife?"

Weakly, Carrie nodded, grimacing in pain.

"Oh, God . . . oh, God!"

"Lelia!" she cried pathetically. "Just a few scrapes. I had to get rid of it, didn't I?"

Lelia stroked her forehead with a trembling hand. "Why didn't you come to me, Carrie? I would have helped you."

She looked away, tightening her face, a spasm rack-ing her thin body. Blood kept seeping from her body, Lelia noticed with horror. Ripping off her petticoat, she

tried to staunch the flow. And she talked. Talked nonsense—silly little things to make Carrie smile and keep her mind off this grievous hurt. And she gripped Carrie's hand with iron fingers, hoping that her strength might reach the sick woman. . . .

A knock on the door brought Lelia round. Standing on the threshold was the doctor. He introduced himself.

"I'm Dr. Houghton."

Muttering her thanks, Lelia directed him to Carrie, then stood back and watched his examination. He was quick and thorough, his deft hands gentle. Over his shoulder, he flung an order. "Call the attendants. We'll take her to the hospital."

Out Lelia ran to the street. The usual rapacious crowd had clustered, undoubtedly disappointed to find no murder afoot. Signalling the attendants, Lelia took them upstairs. While they were wrapping Carrie up on the stretcher, Dr. Houghton approached her.

"What'd she do to herself?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Don't you know?"

"Naturally," he replied with some irritation. "Where is it?"

She pointed to the bowl.

"Jesus," he muttered.

"Will she live?"

"God only knows," he replied tiredly, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "What's one drab more or less?"

"One drab more or less . . ." Lelia echoed, a faint smile touching her lips.

At her tone, he gave her a sharp glance.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "It happens quite often."

He looked bewildered.

"I don't look like a whore."

"Oh," he replied, so thoughtfully that it was now her turn to be embarrassed.

"Aren't you going back to the hospital?"

"No . . . no, I'm off-duty." Glaring at the bed, he prowled around the room. "You live like this, too?" he asked in a scathing tone.

"My room's across the hall. I'll give you a cup of tea, if you like. You look exhausted." His eyes narrowed, a flicker of strong emotion crossing his face. Lelia knew it well. Hesitating at the door, she said, "Will you come?"

He fought a battle and lost. "Yes," he whispered.

Whatever Dr. Houghton was expecting, it wasn't Lelia's room. A young girl's room, one would have guessed, from its virginal quality: the pristine bed with its white counterpane, the neat row of books bracketed by two pitchers on the mantel, dresses and shoes hanging up in orderly fashion behind a curtained alcove—not the ordinary domicile of a prostitute. Ushering him in, Lelia shut the door and quietly locked it. Lighting an oil lamp, she set it down on the table next his chair, then picked up the kettle and began poking the fire.

"Here, let me do that," he said and knelt beside her. Purposely brushing against him, Lelia rose to her feet. He was very nervous, his good-looking face tense, his movements awkward. Like a moth drawn to flame, his eyes followed her in alarmed fascination. Instinctively, she knew this was the man she'd been waiting for. No one had touched her since the West End, and she loathed the idea of starting in all over again, but this was too good a chance to miss. He was unmistakably a gentleman and, she suspected, well-to-do. If her luck held, he might get her out of this insidious trap. Still, Lelia felt sorry for him. He looked very young, and his proficiency as a doctor couldn't mask his worldly inexperience. She knew he wanted her badly yet found the idea of a bedding a whore repellent. At her dresser, she shook down her heavy hair, and gave it a few strokes with the brush. Wiping off the rouge and lipstick, she continued to watch him in the mirror, standing in such a way that he could observe her every action. It was a hot night. As if to get more air, she unfastened the top buttons of her low-cut blouse and dabbed on some cologne.

The kettle was singing merrily and Lelia returned to

the fireplace. Dr. Houghton was staring at her, mesmerized.

Smiling, she poured out tea. When she handed him a cup, it rattled in its plate. His eyes strayed from her face to her décolletage, then back again. His fine brown hair fell in a soft wave across his forehead, making him look oddly vulnerable. Finishing his tea with a gulp, he slammed down the saucer on the table. Without something to hold onto, his beautifully shaped, competent hands appeared lost. Tension etched his face, highlighting the cheekbones and the wary brown eyes.

"What's your name?" he asked huskily.

Drawing him to his feet, she caressed the back of his neck and cupped his hands over her breasts. "Lelia," she breathed.

With a low moan, he embraced her, kissing her with such violence, it hurt. Before she could catch her breath, he had carried her to the bed. Within minutes, he had entered her and lay trembling on her body, exhausted. Falling asleep, he slept heavily in her arms, leaving her bereft. For hours Lelia lay awake, watching a sickly dawn creep between the curtains. Would she never find a man who could make her sleep, who would hold her and keep away the night terrors? And she wept bitter tears. . . .

When Dr. Houghton awoke, Lelia could tell from his studious avoidance of her eyes that the episode had disgusted him. Smoothing his wrinkled suit, he combed his hair and flung down a bill on the dresser.

Declining her offer of tea, he said in a cold voice, "Please don't get up," flicking her a brief glance.

Buttoning her bodice, Lelia sat up feeling very stiff. "When may I see Carrie?"

His hand was on the doorknob. The answer came brusquely. "Tomorrow." And he was gone.

Oh, well, she thought wryly, shame and disgust are part of the game. Maybe the next one will be better.

The next afternoon Lelia used her hour's break to visit Carrie in the London Hospital. She lay in a long, grey-painted ward with other female patients—a place

reminiscent of a Whitechapel street—iron beds stretching away bleakly in the distance like ugly, squat houses. A few of them, containing the mortally ill or the dead, were screened. Both the smell and the noise was offensive. How one could sleep in such an atmosphere, Lelia couldn't imagine. A constant hum of moans, talking, bursts of laughter, and hopeless sobbing reverberated. A gruff-looking nurse took her to Carrie's bedside. She was as white as the sheets encasing her frail body, but if they could patch her up she'd be out on the streets in no time. What she ought to do was go back to Dorset, her home, Lelia thought. Anything was better than Whitechapel, but shame would keep her away. Footsteps approached the bed.

"How is she?" Lelia asked, not looking up.

"Mending," replied Dr. Houghton, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "Can I see you tonight?" His voice was low.

Pausing just long enough to show her hurt, Lelia said quietly, "I get off work at one-thirty."

Interest, suspicion, and jealousy flashed across his face. "What do you do?"

Charmed by such visible feelings, she smiled. "I'm a barmaid at The Unicorn."

"On Whitechapel High Street?" At her nod, he added, "I'll come and get you, all right?"

Meeting his eyes, she saw a strong desire and less contempt. He was mellowing. She stroked his hand in reply.

Michael Houghton became Lelia's protector, sleeping with her whenever he could get a night off from the hospital. Although, constantly battling a sense of shame—an outgrowth of his rigid, evangelistic upbringing—his craving for her was such that it ruled out any immediate break. And all the time, she was subtly working on him, making herself indispensable to his sexual and emotional needs, hoping that one day the miracle would occur and he would take her away from East London.

One night lying beside her in the small bed, he asked, "How did you land in this rotten place?"

Lelia stared at the ceiling, watching shadows dart across it from the lamp. "An accident."

"Were you seduced?"

Not wanting to talk about it, she shook her head.

"Lelia—"

"Michael, please, it's so long ago I can't remember."

"How can you possibly forget?" He looked shocked.

Tears stung her eyes, and she turned away from him.

"I can't bear for you to be in this place."

Fatigue made her honest. "It's you, Michael. You don't want to be here."

His silence verified Lelia's accusation. Then, in wonder, he traced a tear down her cheek.

"Are you surprised that I can still weep?"

"What happened to you, Lelia? Tell me. You're not like those girls out there."

The pain was so great it kept her voice steady. "I was raped . . . There was a child. My boy . . . my boy died."

He kissed her cheek. "I'm so sorry." Still the tears fell and he tried in a clumsy fashion to comfort her. "Really, sweet, I don't like seeing you here. It's not safe. Last night they brought in a girl who was so badly cut up—Jesus! I've never seen anything like it. And she's not the first. Another victim of the Hoxton Street gang, I suppose. It's what they do before they kill them that's so awful . . ."

Shuddering, she snuggled within the warmth of his arm. "When you don't come the potboy walks me home or Jack—"

"And that's something else," he barked, instantly possessive. "I don't like the way he looks at you. Damned fellow can't take his eyes away."

"Silly!" she laughed, tweaking his chin. "He's got a girl, and is just checking to see if I'm doing my work."

Michael was not in a teasing mood. "I'm moving you out of here."

Lelia's eyes narrowed. "Where to?"

"Cheyne Walk."

It was even better than she had ever hoped for, but

she gave a faint sneer. "You can't take me to that respectable bulwark."

"Well, if Rossetti could live there, you can live there, too." He snorted. "It's my house and I'll bring in whom-ever I please. A bevy of servants will attend your every wish . . . Just a few more months of this foul work, and then I'm off to St. Thomas's." He smiled a crooked, engaging smile. "How's that?"

"Not bad." She caressed his face. "Why do you hate Whitechapel so?"

"The filth . . . these awful people . . . the stink—"

"Then, why do you work here?"

"My family has always done charity work. It's part of my training. At least—" He grinned. "It brought me a dividend—you." Kissing her mouth, he whispered, "Are you coming with me?"

"I'd be a fool not to, wouldn't I?" Lelia said, and proceeded to express her gratitude. But as their lips touched in passion, Jared Stoner's face came between them and she felt her heart wrench.

8.



MICHAEL HOUGHTON made good his word. Giving the landlady two months' extra rent, and hailing a hansom cab with a flourish, he pushed Lelia and her shabby suitcase into one corner and then jumped aboard, speeding out of East London with a triumphant laugh. Dressed in a working girl's outfit, Lelia mulled over her reception at Cheyne Walk. Beauty can run any gauntlet, Michael said, attempting to reassure her. Yes, she

thought glumly, a pretty face and figure, and poor clothes will scream aloud my profession.

At her downcast look, Michael said emphatically, "If the servants don't like it, I'll boot the whole lot out."

His pugnacious, protective attitude worked to her advantage. They didn't approve. She saw it in their averted eyes and surly expressions, but he made it explicit that Lelia and he were living together, and he would brook no insolence. The point made, he whisked Lelia off to a fashionable modiste used by his sister—a risky venture, she thought, considering her position—but the clerks treated her with deference. Clearly, an *affaire de coeur* was routine.

Returning from Knightsbridge, they drove slowly back to Cheyne Walk, basking in a glorious autumnal day. Everywhere a riot of orange, red, and yellow coloring, and a crisp smoky smell. Michael's house was in a row of lovely Georgian and Queen Anne brick houses overlooking the Thames. Delicate wrought-iron gates encompassed a small front garden; a larger one stretched to the rear filled with fruit trees, cascading vines, and flowers. Even from that sheltered distance the air shook with noise from King's Road: pounding traffic on the cobblestones, cries and shouts of tradesmen, caterwauling costermongers, and the gay tunes of the organ grinders. But one step inside the Corinthian-pilastered, hooded doorway, a new world appeared. Sound was muffled in this enchanting, spacious house. A large drawing room faced the river, its front wall a solid bank of windows. On one of the paneled walls, opposite the entrance, hung old mirrors of every size and shape, reflecting the Thames and the room from every angle. Paneling ran throughout the house. Across the hall, an elegant dining room opened into the study, a wonderful place lined with book shelves where Lelia spent many happy hours. Upstairs, on the first floor, was a lovely room with a river view, converted to a smoking room. Folding doors at the rear led to Michael's bedroom, which overlooked the garden. The servants slept

on the third floor. So smoothly was the house run that seldom was she aware of their presence.

Quickly, they settled into a new routine. Her new wardrobe arrived and Lelia was now a "lady." Michael still spent many long hours in Whitechapel, and she adjusted her schedule accordingly. After the first of the year he was off to St. Thomas's, and would do only day work, she hoped.

Lelia drifted while living with him: half her mind battling the problem of Stoner and how best to handle him, and the other half luxuriating in her new idleness like a convalescent. Captivated by the exquisite house and intoxicated by Chelsea, she wistfully fantasied about a life with Michael as his wife. Really, they were not that far apart in class, and in her mother's eyes, he would have made a good husband. Yet time and again, she saw that he wanted her on only one level. Constantly surprised at the extent of her intellectual accomplishments, like most of her clients, he showed no interest in her origins or ambitions. She only existed for him physically. She felt one stab of pain and then the revelation ceased to hurt. It was a bitter lesson that she had learned years before from Lord Hunt. Thus, with Michael, she delighted in his beautiful house, secretly pretending that it was hers—a harmless pastime. And he was a kind and good-natured companion, except when overtaken by the demon of conscience. Then the charm disappeared into spite. Shame lay at the root of it. She both thrilled and appalled him—his first mistress.

They lived very quietly, not indulging in any social or cultural activities in London. Chelsea was the focal point, and after the perils of the West End, Lelia minded this decision not at all. Long walks were taken down to Chelsea Reach and the elm-bordered embankment—the constant flow of river traffic never wearied the onlooker. Often, they strolled along King's Road, once Charles II's private road from Whitehall to Hampton Court, admiring the young women aesthetes dressed like Kate Greenaway drawings or in flowing Pre-

Raphaelite gowns. Captivated by the latter dresses, Lelia bought one, but at Michael's sneer hid it in the back of her closet. They patronized all the small shops—a few in King's Road—the majority cramming the side streets. Heading south, they might stop at the illustrious Magpie and Stump, an ancient tavern, clinging to a parcel of land allotted to it by Henry VIII; or visit the little shops huddling among the houses on the tree-lined riverbank. A ravishing sight, on a misty day or evening, was Battersea Bridge, a frail expansion of wood darting across the Thames, trailing a myriad reflexion of lights in the water.

They took these jaunts together or separately. Gradually, Lelia forgot about Whitechapel—except in her nightmares, and here she had a constant problem with Michael. When he was home, he refused her a night light. In vain, she pleaded that she didn't know where she was when she woke up. Or who you're with? he snarled. She stopped asking.

Christmas was bad, unexpectedly so. Michael had promised to stay with her and not go down to the family seat in Kent. A few days before, they bought provisions for a large meal and a tree, and like two excited children spent the afternoon and evening decorating it. That night in bed, Lelia touched him in a way which gave him great pleasure, so much so she assumed they would spend a very good evening together. Instead, after a moment's pause, he leapt out of bed, turned up the gaslight, and tore off the bedclothes, leaving her naked and vulnerable to his scathing attack. Heartsick, she heard him call her every vile name imaginable.

Pulling a sheet around her chilled body, she finally found her voice. "I thought you'd like it, Michael."

"Damn you! It's a filthy whore's trick." And flinging on his robe, he slammed into the dressing room, where he spent the rest of the night.

Early the next morning, without even an apology, he announced coolly that he was off to Kent and would return sometime after New Year's. Shocked and hurt, she watched [redacted] go without a murmur. Probably, her

days were numbered. More and more, he'd been angered by the looks directed at her in the street. As in Amberley, everyone knew what she was, and his sense of transgression was building.

Dismissing the staff on Christmas Eve, Lelia spent the next day alone reading, pretending that it was an ordinary day. In the late afternoon, she bundled up and walked along the flagged pavement to the wide row of the embankment, avoiding the brightly lit houses packed with family and guests for a huge, festive dinner. Savory odors wafted out into the frosty air, mingling with shouts of laughter. Her boots crunched on a thin layer of snow. A governess, shepherding her brood, skidded across the street at sight of her, skirts flailing in the wind, just as she and her compatriots must have done encountering Rossetti, in wide hat and cloak, loping batlike up the Walk to gaze with chloral-tormented eyes at the drifting sails in twilight.

She hadn't looked at the tree since Michael's departure, because all she saw was David's rounded eyes, shining with excitement, and his small, greedy fingers reaching out to touch the magical ornaments. And the water-meadows . . . the water-meadows . . .

She was barren. Each year made that fact all too painfully apparent, and she grieved for her dead and the unborn. For all intents and purposes, her life was over.

Beyond the Embankment rushed the black river. Far apart, gas lamps twinkled. Wisps of clouds parted in the sky revealing a full moon, turning the landscape an eerie white. An exquisite night, Lelia thought, meant for lovers. This year there would be no suicidal urges. She cared about nothing, loved no one, and had but one ambition, which now must be put into action. Michael's erratic conduct made it even more urgent. Next year at this time, she hoped Jared Stoner would be dead.

Michael returned to Cheyne Walk, as aloof as on his departure. Lightly kissing his cheek, Lelia fetched him

a glass of sherry and watched as he flopped down on the drawing room sofa, his morose mood reflected in every mirror. She poured herself some sherry waiting for the ultimatum, which never came. Certainly, she couldn't fault him for being at odds with his family. As the second son of a baronet, he had been forced to carve out a career, a totally unappealing one, she suspected. Too much suffering involved. And the pressures on him were great. The heir was consumptive, hence Michael had to be ready to inherit the title. Adding to his woes was his mother—a doting but immensely dominating woman. She, Lelia felt, was responsible for his crippling feelings of guilt. Naturally, his family kept tabs on him, and from his gloomy air she sensed that their affair was known, and he'd been given a very hard time. His nature was such that he couldn't withstand them for long.

He ran a predictable course—sleeping apart from her on his dressing room cot for several days. Finally, she thought the situation was getting out of hand. One night she went to him, and dropping her negligee stood before him naked. And oh, he wanted her all right. Right then and there, he took her on that cot bed, using her as desperately as he had that first night in Stepney. Afterward, he came back to bed. Outwardly life went on as before, until February, that most dreary of months.

They were having a lazy, leisurely breakfast. Michael, not due at St. Thomas's until the afternoon, sat buried in *The Times*, while Lelia gazed idly out the window at the muffin man, making his rounds with a baize-covered tray on his head, ringing his bell to alert customers. In came the butler with the post. A muffled exclamation drew Lelia's attention to Michael and to the cream-colored, crested, thick envelope. Instantly, she knew it meant trouble. A warning from his mother, or an anonymous note about her liaison with Lord Hunt. The knuckles on his hand grew white as he skimmed the contents.

"I must go home," he mumbled.

"What is it? What's happened?" Lelia asked, trying to conceal her alarm.

"Nothing, Lelia, it's nothing." His voice was razor sharp. With an irritable movement, he pushed back his chair so abruptly that it fell over, and left the room.

She followed to find him throwing clothes into a valise, not even waiting for his valet.

"I'll be back as soon as possible," he said tensely.

Lelia went to embrace him, but he quickly disengaged himself and hurried away. No clue remained as to what had occurred. The letter was gone.

A week later he was back at Cheyne Walk, grim and tired, unable to look Lelia in the eye. Bleakly, he stared out at the ice-clogged river from the drawing room windows.

Expecting the worst, she asked softly, "Shall I move out?"

He gave no sign of hearing. "Were you Lord Hunt's mistress?"

It would haunt her until the end of her life. "Yes."

Finally, he faced her. "Did he father your child?"

She nodded, too shaken to speak.

Again, he returned to his survey of the Thames. In the long silence following, she felt her nerves snap. "And the jewels?" Her low voice rose bitterly. "Aren't you going to ask me about them?"

Disgust crossed his ashen face, and she helped him out.

"No, Michael, I did not steal the parure. Stephen gave it to me as a gift shortly before his death, but his wife hates me and has accused me of theft."

"I believe you." He flicked a tongue over dry lips. "I won't discuss it again."

Angrily, Lelia swung away from him.

He beat a fist against the window. "My parents are deeply distressed about you—about us," he added with a weary sigh. "After all, I have some obligation to them. My brother is very frail . . ." Nervously, he cleared his throat. "I've agreed to their wishes."

"Their wishes?"

"That I settle down and . . . get married. I'm marrying a girl from the neighboring estate . . ."

"And when will that be?" she brightly asked.

"May, I think. We . . . we became engaged a few days ago."

"I see," she replied, sweeping out of the room, up the stairs to their bedroom. Immediately, he was behind her.

"What are you doing?"

Her eyes were cold and clear. "Leaving."

Falling to his knees, Michael pressed his head against her breasts. "Lelia, please, don't leave me. I can't give this—I can't give you up!"

Smoothing his tousled hair, she kept her voice gentle. "You've always had mixed feelings about me, Michael. Don't pretend."

"Lelia . . . Lelia! I won't give you up!"

"Teach your bride," she said brutally, thrusting him away.

"My God! Do you care nothing about me at all?"

"A great deal, Michael, but it's over and done with."

At her sad smile, he began to plead. "No! No, I'll set you up someplace else. Anywhere . . . just say yes—please, Lelia."

"You need to give your bride a chance."

"And I'm asking you to give me a chance," he exploded. "God damn it! I need you."

Not wishing to provoke a more violent outburst, Lelia pretended to agree to his demands and became once again the submissive, loving mistress. Lying in bed with Michael asleep, after their reconciliation, she mapped out a strategy for her new life. No compunction whatever did she feel about abandoning him—it was the bed and its pleasures he craved, not her. At the first sign of pregnancy in his wife, he would forsake a love nest. She knew that the vicious life would clash too much with his noble ideals.

No more delay. She must compose a letter to Jared Stoner, asking for a job. She would make no mention of her family's ruin—just that their parents had been

close friends. As a recent widow, she found herself in reduced circumstances, and was turning to him now for help . . . References were no problems. She would just dash off a letter or two extolling her accomplishments as companion or governess. Any trick to get inside his house, Lelia thought. I will lie and cheat and when I have taken that bastard into my confidence, I will destroy him and his family.

Now, all she had to remember was the name of that blasted village.

The next afternoon, Lelia spent two hours at the local library, pouring over a map of Norfolk. Routinely, she read through all the village names. Nothing sounded right until she began whispering them. Ingoldisthorpe. Then aloud, with a quickening heartbeat: "Ingoldisthorpe." And she knew she had found it. South of Hunstanton, north of King's Lynn, as her mother had once said.

Hurrying back to Cheyne Walk, she drafted a letter to Jared Stoner, rewriting it many times before satisfied. Once it was composed, she made a perfect copy with a surprisingly steady hand. Then more drafts for two letters of recommendation, written on different sheets of notepaper in a disguised handwriting. Glancing up from her labors, fear stabbed her. What if Stoner wasn't in residence? Her pleading letter might reach Richmond Hill when he was abroad. Day after day she waited for the mail in an agony of suspense. And then at last it came. A bold, arrogant hand informing Lelia that he would be pleased to see her a week Thursday at 3:30 P.M. He—Jared Stoner.

It was already Wednesday. Eight days to purchase a change of wardrobe and a trunk and to shape a new identity. With luck Michael would be at St. Thomas's the following Wednesday, and she could pack and move all on the same day, embarking from Liverpool Street Station.

Fortunately, she still had some money, and this enabled her to buy a stout trunk—not to be delivered until Wednesday morning; and to set about altering her

appearance. Regrettably, that meant mourning, and so off she trudged to Peter Jones' draper's shop in Sloane Square. How she hated black clothes . . . reminding her so of her little boy. To cheer herself, she would keep her exquisite lingerie. It amused her to think of such finery under stiff widow's weeds!

During Michael's absence, Lelia spent hours experimenting. The elaborate headdress, brushed forward in the French fashion, gave way to a severe chignon. As the fine clothes and exterior frills went, she began to look like what she was aping: a genteel poor widow—boring and eminently respectable. Standing critically before Michael's cheval glass, she judged the transformation a success. Without makeup and in these drab garments, she had escaped the look of the prostitute. Just an average, dull woman. However, a downcast look suggesting humility was in order. That would mask the two bright eyes, the imperious nose and mouth. A few memories of Christine Marshall might humble her. . . .

On her last night in Cheyne Walk, Lelia lay awake beside Michael for hours, plotting and planning; grateful to him for not touching her. Tomorrow, she would forget him, and in the end he would rejoice at her departure. They breakfasted together, repeating a familiar scene. A perfunctory kiss on the cheek and he was out the door without a look at his mistress. Waving to his retreating back, for one moment she was overcome by an intolerable sadness. Dear God! Why can't I care for him? she thought miserably. Because your heart died years ago, came the bitter reply, and no man will ever set it on fire.

Hardly had Michael vanished from sight in swift pursuit of a cab, then a delivery van pulled up to the curb with Lelia's trunk. Up the stairs it went. Now the servants would know, and she had to move quickly. She flew to the bedroom and began to pack. Slamming down the trunk lid, she pinned up her hair, put on one of her new black dresses, tied on a widow's bonnet and veil, and slipped into an ulster. As a finishing touch, she slid on the wedding ring she had worn as "Mrs.

Savage." Ringing for a servant, she left a farewell letter for Michael on his pillow, and then sailed out of Cheyne Walk without a twinge of regret.

Lelia Savage felt exhilarated—breathless—as if she were racing to her destiny.

II.

The Journey

9.



1886. February—the coldest month in thirty years, it was said. Lelia sat huddled in a corner of a first-class carriage, feet on a foot warmer and nose pressed against the window, looking out at the flat, desolate countryside of East Anglia. It had been foolish to splurge on a train journey, but she wanted a few hours of peace and relaxation. The book purchased at the terminal stall lay neglected; concentration was beyond her at this point. Not even the sight of Ely Cathedral on its flat hill moved her. Everything was grey: bare ploughed fields were stark or covered with muddy snow; spires tipped crazily across eerie marshes; brick and flint cottages crouched like the infirm against winter's onslaught. Only the windmills stood brave and undaunted.

Hunstanton was her destination. King's Lynn had appeared too formidably large, and she preferred a stop on the coast, which she had not visited since Devon. With reckless indulgence, she took a room at The Golden Sovereign, a great Tudor inn complete with gatehouse and courtyard around which the building had developed. As in the coaching days, passengers wishing light or liquid refreshment visited the small room to the left of the archway. Potential lodgers trooped across the courtyard to the main body of the inn. Above the ground floor warren, short flights of steps, plunging up and down, linked a mass of bedrooms together. Outside, all was timber and herring-bone brickwork with an enormous circular window taking full advantage of the seaside horizon. Now off

season, the inn was mostly deserted. Normally, one would have to book a reservation months in advance.

The charm of this rattling old place took Lelia's mind off Stoner, and she hurried outside to the bracing, chilly air for a walk. As she reached the cliffs and gazed out at the Wash, spellbound by an endless vista of sea-marsh flats, the sun began to set and the water shimmered with an iridescent beauty. Sea birds, shimmering in an opal light, flew in long, low lines over the quiet sea, their thin, mewing cries trilling back and forth. Behind her, the pan-tiled roofs—some red, others the Norfolk dark blue glaze—shone under a darkening sky.

Refreshed, she returned to the inn for a cup of tea. A leisurely dinner followed, and then she retired to her small room, rehearsing what she would say to Stoner. Read a few chapters, get a good night's sleep—that was the intention, but it was futile. An acute, paralyzing fear numbed her. What if he turned her down? With ten pounds to her name, her pose of respectability wasn't going to last very long.

Lelia slept one or two wretched hours, awakening with every muscle stiff. Glancing in the dim mirror, she saw that her eyes were deeply shadowed. Well, that might suggest grief, she thought. He mustn't think I'm a schemer. No matter what he says, I must be very nice and calm. I'm poor, in need of work—there's nothing more to it than that. And if he won't hire me, I'll get him some other way, she added grimly. Nine years, Stoner. It's taken me nine years to get here, but I'm ready now and you won't escape me. . . .

Breakfast and a brisk walk along the beach boosted Lelia's flagging spirits, and by early afternoon she felt a glow of confidence as the old hatred seethed within.

Dressed and ready to go, she took one last critical look in the mirror. Yes, she would do. She looked the part. With growing excitement, she summoned a porter to check her luggage—in case of a refusal—and then hired a carriage to Ingoldisthorpe. The landscape seemed even more wild and forbidding than it had yesterday. A fierce wind buffeted the cab. It creaked in

protest, and Lelia shivered at every blast. Not even Whitechapel had been this cold. Only the pine trees seemed immune. Taking off her gloves, she stared at the wedding ring, repeating, "Lelia Lockwood . . . Lelia Lockwood. God, let him believe me, please!"

Ingoldisthorpe. They were approaching the gates. Across the road, Lelia caught a glimpse of an ancient church and a churchyard. A porter stepped out from a brick gatehouse, and limping over to the massive iron gates, swung them back. Once inside, Lelia's heart skipped a beat at the magnificent sweep of park, its brown, stubbly lawn awaiting spring's renewal. Everywhere, lovely trees of endless variety—some hundreds of years old—dotted the landscape. They rode between an avenue of giant oak trees: lake in the distance, formal gardens stretching out of sight. Up, up the incline they drove, and suddenly there it was—Richmond Hill. A glory of a house bringing tears of pleasure to the eyes. Even as a child she had been moved. Now, as an adult, she understood its power. No wonder Tobias had bled her father white to maintain this treasure. . . . Light pink brickwork, mullioned windows glittering in the pale winter sun, flanking corner towers, the pinnaled frontage—it took one's breath away. When the coachman helped her down, Lelia stood rapt, until a hacking cough drew her attention to his neglected fare.

Dazed, she stared up at the great oriel window curving over the carved stone entrance porch; behind her the carriage wheeled out the drive. With shoulders squared, she strode up to an immense oak door and loudly tapped a great dragon's head knocker. Once, twice, and three times to be heard. Again, she looked back at the view magically spread out below. Richmond Hill, a paradise. She must be careful not to fall under its spell.

The butler opened the door. A thin, cantankerous individual—or so he seemed then—garbed in musty black, he ushered Lelia through a foyer and into a lofty corridor, one side of which was composed of oak paneling, while the other was a great bank of windows looking out on a huge, enclosed courtyard. In the wing

opposite shone another brilliant oriel window. Lelia was shown into a morning room. It was a crowded, pleasant room, reminiscent of her mother's in Wickford—richly carved paneling, heavy dark furniture, a jumble of bric-a-brac and plants—whose comfortable atmosphere was totally eclipsed by a gigantic bay window at the far end of the room. So lavish was it, Lelia thought it might once have graced a royal bedroom for a visiting monarch.

She was kept waiting a long time; her nerves in such a state that she couldn't sit still. Twice, she took off her ulster and flung it back on; only to cast it aside a third time. The bastard must see her in her widowed state . . . With haunted eyes, she watched the hand of the French ormolu clock tick off the minutes. God damn it! One day she'd make him grovel at her feet. . . .

The matchstick-thin butler returned and with a lean hand beckoned her to follow. Clutching her bag, she stepped out again into that extraordinary corridor. A left-hand turn and they were in another wing with more windows encircling the courtyard. Before an elaborately carved door, they halted. The master's study.

The butler knocked softly and announced her name. Lelia Savage stepped forward, hearing the door swing shut behind her. A crowd of impressions filtered into her awed brain. It was an elegant, but masculine room. A fire blazed in a stone fireplace before which was set a low table with a tray of decanters and an empire couch. Bookshelves were built into the wall; one of which contained a set of law books, and she remembered that Stoner had been called to the Bar years before. Hunting prints and boating scenes decorated the oak panels; oriental carpets were scattered on the floor.

The master of Richmond Hill sat at the far end of the room, his back to a bay window which overlooked a formal garden. Still engrossed in his work at her entrance, he flung down the pen as Lelia began the long walk across the expanse of carpet. Finally, she planted herself in front of the Napoleon desk. Their eyes locked, and he slowly got to his feet.

The moss rose. The kiss on the hand. For one terrible moment she thought he remembered her. Her enemy . . . Once, he might have been a lover, and for a fraction of a second Lelia looked at him with a harlot's hard eyes, admiring his great strength, broad shoulders, his height, and magnificent physique. Power was the immediate impression one got from him—he dominated his surroundings and everyone he was with. But it was not a healthy vitality; it was as dangerous as a smouldering volcano. A burning discontent, a restless tension consumed him. He was still as handsome as when she last saw him, but the satanic archangel had become even more jaded, the features embittered. The black eyes were angry, very angry.

In that brief second, as they took one another's measure, Lelia thought he looked like a man who would engulf and drown a woman with a glance, whose single touch would bring about her ruin. A formidable opponent, but she was eager and desperate to take him on. I am worthy of him, she thought coolly. I will beat him. When she sat down she was smiling.

"Now, Mrs.—" he began in a low, rich voice, fumbling through the papers on his desk. She noticed a partly filled brandy glass at his side and wondered if he was as heavy a drinker as his father.

"Lockwood," she said clearly. "Lelia Lockwood."

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Lockwood." Skimming the letter, he sat down and waited for her to begin.

The picture of composure, she launched her plea, "You very kindly wrote, inviting me to come and see you this afternoon about a situation at Richmond Hill."

"Your circumstances, Mrs. Lockwood, what are they?" He stifled a yawn. "You say we knew one another?" A curious look crossed his face.

Hastening to correct his mistake, Lelia met his prolonged scrutiny, keeping her voice even. "No, our parents were friends—years ago." Fishing out a black-trimmed handkerchief, she dabbed at her eyes. "My husband died recently—"

"His ship foundered?"

"Off Cornwall. Everyone was lost . . ." Her voice trailed away in dismay.

Stoner's heavy lidded-glance took in her shabby clothes. "Leaving you impoverished, eh?"

Lelia blinked at him in woebegone fashion, nervously twisting her gloves. "Reduced circumstances, yes."

"And your child—is it here with you?"

A stab of pain hit her. "No, he's dead."

"Well, that's a relief. Not to have a brat running around the place."

It took every ounce of courage she possessed to keep from breaking at that point. Lelia stared at him with dead eyes, hiding her hatred.

"Before my marriage, I worked both as a governess and a companion. I realize it was presumptuous to come, but I hoped you might have need of me."

He smiled cynically, showing perfect teeth. A nasty smirk. Well, she'd walked right into it. With a subtle movement, she slightly altered her position so that he might see that she was not as flat-chested as the dress implied. His cold eyes slid down her bodice, then up to her face. Decidedly, he looked more interested. He was a womanizer, as her mother had said.

"No need of a governess here. My sons are at school."

Her expression turned beseeching.

"But my wife needs a companion. God knows, they come and go at such a rate we might as well try you!"

With wildly beating heart, Lelia beamed her appreciation.

Rising, he tossed down the rest of his brandy. "I'll take you to her—the Lady Margaret," he added with a sneer.

Striding across the carpet, he barked an order. "Get rid of that damned bonnet, will you? She abhors black." And without another word he marched out into the corridor, treading silently for such a big man, even though he was wearing riding boots. Running to keep up with him, as they passed the morning room, Lelia tossed the offending hat onto her ulster. Beyond the foyer, he

stood waiting, hands on hips, looking bored and impatient.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed. Her eyes widened at sight of the Elizabethan "dog-legged" carved oak staircase. Lavishly constructed—each broad flight turning back in the opposite direction from the one before—a great delicacy had gone into the carving of newels, finials, strings, and balusters. Decorating every newel post was a cornucopia. A charming touch, she thought.

As if reading her mind, Stoner said coldly, "One of Richmond Hill's many ironies."

Turning left on the first floor, he passed a number of closed doors, muttering, "Guest rooms." At the corridor's end, he halted and loudly rapped on a door painted in the Georgian fashion, then flung it open. A little maid fluttered before him like a frightened sparrow.

"Meg," he bellowed, "I've brought you another, and perhaps you'll treat this one better than the others."

"But is she any better, darling?" drawled his wife.

Lelia found herself in a sitting room, whose lovely oak walls had been painted a blue-green color. It was not unattractive, but oddly discordant to the senses, as if one were under water. Lady Margaret lay curled on a couch in front of a stone fireplace, swathed in comforters, silken pillows at her back. A once beautiful woman, judged Lelia, who had no childhood memory of her. Traces of a porcelain fragility remained in the aristocratic features, the imperious toss of the head, and the swanlike neck. But delicate lines now marked this proud beauty, and her face—fighting one last desperate battle against encroaching age—bore a peculiar rigidity, as if every joyous emotion had been stamped out of it. Petulance rather than sadness drooped around her like a cloak.

How did she feel about Stoner? Watching him approach, Lelia saw her stiffen like a cat, and her body seemed to bristle, sensing an enemy. Dislike shone from the large grey eyes, and she flipped an impatient hand

through her shoulder-length brown hair, ignoring him. As for Jared Stoner, his face was a mask.

"Why the black?" she asked crossly.

"I'm in mourning, m'lady."

"For how long?" The tone was brisk and efficient.

Lelia blinked, for a moment forgetting. "At least a year and a half more—"

Stoner cut in, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "My wife is an invalid. Humor her—" And with that he was out the door.

A spasm of contempt shot across his wife's face. Calling out to the little sparrow in the bedroom beyond, she shouted, "Bring me a glass and don't drop it, you fool!" Glaring at Lelia, she moved restlessly on the couch, kicking off the comforters and disclosing an exquisite peignoir and dainty satin slippers. "What's your name?" she snapped.

"Lelia Lockwood, m'lady."

Out popped the creature with a brimming wine glass of a ruby-colored liquid, which she carefully handed to her mistress. Taking a deep drink, Lady Margaret closed her eyes and smiled. Lelia stood by, ill at ease, wondering if she should leave. At last the pale eyes opened.

"Whom are you mourning?" she asked with a long sigh.

Thinking of David, Lelia's eyes stung with tears. "My husband."

A mocking note entered her voice. "And were you happy?"

Inspiration made Lelia tell her exactly what she wanted to hear, and gave her the clue how to handle every member of the household.

"No, m'lady, I was not. Quite unhappy." The crystalline eyes filled with sympathy. "He was . . . most unkind." She sniffed into her handkerchief.

"Aren't they all bastards?" And Lady Margaret burst into laughter. Downing the glass, a thin hand reached out and squeezed her companion's. "We'll be good friends, Lelia. I won't call you Lockwood—much too

ing. Cover me, I want to sleep. I'll see you at dinner, or—" An eye flicked open. "Is my husband making you dine by yourself?"

"He didn't say, m'lady."

Nestling down into the cushions, she purred like a kitten. "Good. Then you'll be with us."

The little sparrow came to Lelia's aid. "My name's Bridget, ma'am," she whispered. "Can I show you to your room?"

"Is it all right to leave her?"

"Oh, she'll sleep like a baby now," the maid murmured, leading the way out into the corridor. Dazzled by the expanse of light and the view of the courtyard below, Lelia felt as if she had stepped into an ethereal world from which there was no escape. . . .

Bridget took her toward the east wing and up a steep staircase, used by the servants to reach their attic sleeping quarters. After promising to call Lelia a half-hour before dinner, she sent for her luggage in Hunstanton and fetched her outergarments.

Standing in the middle of that ugly, little room, Lelia almost wept. It was incredible to think that anything hideous existed in Richmond Hill, but this burrow won a prize. All whitewashed with a slanting ceiling, which made standing up a precarious venture, its tiny window slit had access only to a tree limb, and by craning one's head, the ground far below. Even worse, it was freezing. The tiny grate had barely enough space for a working fire and obviously saw little action.

Donning her ulster, gloves, and the miserable bonnet, she tumbled onto the iron bed and fell into a heavy sleep. Awakened at 7:30 by Bridget, she saw that her trunk had arrived. Soon that spry little person had a fire going, while Lelia unpacked and put on another dress for the evening—a more elegant mourning gown than her workaday clothes.

One of her duties was to escort Lady Margaret downstairs each evening. Hastening toward her suite, Lelia realized with dismay that she had no idea what was wrong with her. Stoner's jeering reference to an "in-

valid" suggested neurasthenia or hysteria, rather than a more serious ailment like heart disease. She hoped that enlightenment would soon follow.

Surprisingly, Lady Margaret herself flung open the door to her knock. She was draped in a voluminous olive green and carnation silk concoction, more like a robe than a dress. Everything *au courant* she detested, preferring instead to design her own clothes. Taking Lelia's arm, she chatted in a languid, friendly fashion as they went downstairs.

"How do you like my hair?" she asked with a sideways look.

"I think it very unusual and charmingly worn, m'lady."

"My husband cut it off. He's terribly jealous, you know. A man looked at me and he got angry and hacked it off." She laughed softly.

"Well, he didn't mar your beauty," Lelia responded, thinking Stoner quite capable of such a despicable action.

The drawing room had the double advantage of both a western and a northern exposure for its huge casement windows. Here the wainscoting was of cedar and cypress parquetry, and a spectacular Jacobean plaster ceiling had a gilt and painted floral motif running between interlacing rib patterns. Gold was the predominant color in the upholstery and damask curtains. Fine Flemish rugs covered the floor. Exquisite embroidery decorated the Queen Anne chairs and beautiful screens. English paintings hung on the walls. Gainsborough, Reynolds, and Romney were some of the artists Lelia recognized. Most unusual was the ornate stone and alabaster fireplace with black marble columns.

Lady Margaret draped herself in an armchair by the fire. Her companion moved to an unobtrusive corner. Suddenly a charming young woman, with eyes the color of forget-me-nots, a mass of curly brown hair, and a vivacious, doll-like face, burst in. Her dress was a pink and yellow brocade, very much *à la mode* with its large bustle and train. Ignoring Lady Margaret, the newcomer

spun about the room as if at a ball, and then with a petulant sigh gazed out at the full moon illuminating the landscape. A third elegantly dressed woman followed hard on her heels. It was Jared Stoner's mother—there was no mistaking her, Lelia thought with an intake of breath. Kezia Stoner, now in her sixties, possessed her son's vigor but not his unhappiness. Regal in bearing, she had his black eyes, aquiline nose, and insolent manner. Most astonishing was her hair—it was glorious. White like pure snow, it crowned her head like a halo. She was very impressive and knew it.

At sight of Lelia, an eyebrow shot up unpleasantly. "You're the new companion?" she demanded, bearing down like a storm.

"Yes, Mrs. Stoner," Lelia replied, in a quiet but firm voice, indicating that she was not to be cowed.

"This is my daughter, Daphne." She waved a hand at the moonstruck young woman who advanced with a smile. No problem with that one, Lelia thought coldly, but something is very out of kilter with Lady Margaret, and I would no more trust Mrs. Stoner than I would an adder. A nice household. . . .

Stoner came last, dark as the night in his dinner jacket. From a crystal decanter, he poured out sherry for his mother, his sister, and himself. Apparently, his wife didn't drink and Lelia wasn't invited. While the ladies sipped and gossiped, Stoner roamed restlessly about the room, tossing down a glass and quickly following it with a second. Not once did he pay any attention to his wife or glance in Lelia's direction.

Dinner was announced. Doors opened at the back of the drawing room leading into a spacious dining room. An elaborate plaster ceiling, walls partly paneled and partly covered with Spanish leather, an oriel window, and rich furnishings met the eye. Highly polished wood reflecting candles in silver sconces, glasses sparkling with wine, gleaming silver, and lustrous china reminded Lelia most poignantly of dinners at Wickford. Staying with this family was going to be very hard. But every sad memory gave her strength to destroy them. Casting

down her eyes demurely, she wondered why the dinner was so awful. A bit of stringy meat, a minuscule potato, and a vegetable—bland and dull. Trouble with the help, she supposed.

Stoner sat at one end of the table, far from his wife, who reigned vaguely opposite him. At his side stood a bottle of wine, which he consumed to the dregs. Lelia was fascinated by its effect. Instead of calming his tension, it made him more irritable, so that before the meal was over he simply got up and left without a word.

Lady Margaret, she noticed with interest, took only water, but Kezia Stoner and her daughter drank several glasses of wine apiece. Daphne directed a few remarks at the new companion—they were seated side by side, across from Mrs. Stoner, who faced the oriel window—but mostly Lelia was ignored. The master spoke hardly at all.

Once Lelia caught Stoner's eye, and so piercing a glance did he give her that she thought fearfully he must remember her. It was odd that he never had asked for her maiden name, but his father had had many friends. How had Stephen introduced them that night? She couldn't recall—just a burning kiss on her palm.

Later that night, after escorting Lady Margaret back to her suite, Lelia happened to pass by Stoner's study on her way to the backstairs. Through the open door, she saw him slumped on the couch before the fire morosely drinking some brandy. Hearing the rustle of her skirts, he looked up and called to her to come in. Obeying, she placed herself against the doorjamb.

"Haven't we met before?" he asked in a slurred voice.

"I think not, sir," she replied crisply.

Their eyes met and Lelia saw that he was quite drunk. With an oath, he slammed down the brandy glass on the table. It fell to the carpet by his feet, spilling its contents. And then he passed out, collapsing against the couch.

The corridor was empty. Hesitating for a fraction of a second, Lelia stepped over to him. Black hair tumbling over his forehead, lines of bitterness ~~around~~, made him

seem ten years younger than his probable thirty-eight years. It was the face of her dreams . . . beautiful . . . virile. She could almost feel his skin against her mouth, and taste the fragrance of his body. . . .

Damn you, Stoner. What you need is a woman, she thought angrily, reading all the signs. If your wife won't service you, a visit to the local brothel is better than a bottle of brandy, my friend. God, how I hate you. I could kill you right now and be done with it. But first I will torment you. . . .

Replacing the brandy snifter on the table, Lelia picked up Stoner's heavy legs and eased them onto the couch, then cradled his head against a cushion. His dark eyes flicked open, and he stared at her in wonder. With a start, he seized Lelia's hand and to her utter dismay, gently kissed it. In fear and loathing, she pulled away.

"Am I so repellent to you?" he asked wearily. Then he fell asleep.

Bolting from her drunken enemy, Lelia hurried up to her small, frigid room. The fire was out and frost had formed on the window panes. Gritting her teeth in protest, she undressed and put on her nightclothes, sliding between icy, muslin sheets. Well, at least she'd completed the first step in what she knew was going to be a perilous undertaking. She had schemed her way into Richmond Hill. The serpent under the rose. . . .

Lelia settled into her new routine. Reporting each morning to Lady Margaret at nine o'clock, she remained with her until twelve-thirty, when they lunched downstairs or in her suite, according to her mood. From three to four, Lelia was allotted a free hour, then she was back on duty until seven-thirty, when she was given a half-hour to dress for dinner.

She despised the work, finding it incredibly boring. Some days she had nothing to do but sit in a room with a woman who detested her very presence. Her ladyship refused to talk. On other occasions she ranted, raved, and berated her companion for the smallest infraction. Then, again, Lady Margaret might be very

friendly, but her egocentric nature made conversation difficult. She conducted no correspondence—not even with her children; only her sketch book and a glass of ruby port roused a spark of animation.

At first, Lelia thought she was an alcoholic, but her behavior was atypical. That her husband neglected her was all too evident, but she wasn't entirely certain that her ladyship minded it—at least it gave her a reason for her discontent. He occupied much of her thoughts. Either she would rake him over the coals for every conceivable injustice, or she would laud his sexual prowess to such an extent that even Lelia, with her long experience, was embarrassed.

Occasionally, Lady Margaret was euphoric; at other times serene; more often uneasy and miserably discontent. The pacifier was the decanter. Lelia had been at Richmond Hill a little under a week when she solved the mystery.

Appearing for work one morning, she found Lady Margaret reclining on the sitting room couch, groaning under her breath. As she walked across the carpet, her ladyship sat bolt upright, a look of fury on her face.

"God damn it! Will you stop making such a racket. You're driving spikes into my brain!"

Lelia stopped in astonishment. Any sound was muffled by the thick carpet.

"It's too bright in here," the older woman whined. "Shut the curtains. I can't stand the glare. My eyes hurt so . . ."

Lelia obeyed her, then tiptoed over to the couch and touched her forehead. It felt normal.

"I'm so cold," Lady Margaret mumbled, huddling into the comforters.

"Why not go back to bed, m'lady?"

"Pour me some port. Then I'll go, and please, dear—" She smiled. "Get rid of that clock. It's deafening."

Handing her a glass, Lelia banished the offending mantelpiece clock, with its scarcely audible tick, into a closet. Then she helped her ladyship into bed.

"Ah, now, I'm floating," she breathed, and closed her eyes.

Assured that she was asleep, Lelia returned to the sitting room. Standing by the decanter was her glass with a few remaining drops of liquid. It didn't smell like port or wine. She tasted a drop. No, there was some alcohol, but something else. Again, she sampled it. Of course, she ought to have realized. Laudanum.

Hurrying downstairs, Lelia went to find Jared Stoner, stunned at his withholding such information from her, and earnestly hoping that he had forgotten that curious encounter between them. Since that evening he had ignored her—so on that score she thought herself safe.

Her knock was answered and she opened the study door to see him sitting at his desk immersed in a score of ledgers with the ever-present brandy snifter at his elbow.

"Yes?" He looked up impatiently.

Striding up to his desk, Lelia apologized. "I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but—" Under his heavy-lidded glance, she felt foolish. "You are aware that your wife is taking laudanum?"

With a wry smile, he leaned back in his chair, waving her to a seat. "Well, it didn't take you very long, did it?"

"I don't understand, sir," Lelia coldly replied. "Was this some kind of test?"

"Exactly. The brighter the woman—in my experience—the longer she'll stay for the challenge. The dullards go to pieces, and bolt at the beginning if they know the truth. My wife is a very trying patient. Do you think you can handle her?"

Trying to control her anger, she looked down at her clenched hands. "Well, I know something about addiction."

"What kind?"

"Alcohol," she replied pointedly.

His full mouth curved in scorn. "Not the same thing at all . . ."

"May I ask how long it's been going on?"

"Fourteen years," he said in a biting tone. "Since the

birth of our last child." Picking up a pen, he dashed off a few lines on a piece of paper and handed it to her. "This is the address of a chemist in King's Lynn. Every Monday, go there and refill her prescription. No one will trouble you. They've handled our account for years."

"Did you know that she's taking it straight from a decanter? Actually, two decanters—"

"Well, she's not exceeding the amount ordered each week, so the addiction is being controlled."

"Would you like me to wean her away?"

Under his long, hard look Lelia flushed. "At least, dilute it," she added tightly.

"I think not. At the moment she's manageable. Past experiments of that kind have been unsuccessful." Standing up in dismissal, he crossed his arms. "Don't meddle in things you know nothing about, Mrs.—"

"Lockwood," Lelia replied with icy calm, rising to her feet. "Thank you, sir," and she left the bastard alone with his brandy.

As she could do nothing for the wife, except try and alleviate her suffering, Lelia found herself living for her hour of freedom. No one paid any attention to her rambles, and she took full advantage of the opportunity, exploring available sections of Richmond Hill, and touring the avenues in the park if the weather was tolerable. Soon, a very peculiar fact about the great house emerged. All the lived-in rooms on the ground floor, along with the splendid courtyard and surrounding corridor, were in superb condition, but the eastern and southeastern wings were sealed off, with the exception of the kitchens, laundries, and wine cellar, which were located in the southeast basement. Normally, the rooms next to the morning room were also locked, but on one occasion Lelia caught a glimpse of them, and a sad lot they were: wainscoting in need of repair, furniture in shabby condition, worn carpets, and no paintings or bric-a-brac to enliven the drab setting. Gradually, it dawned on her that what she was seeing was a stage set. A few rooms were kept up for appearance's

sake and the rest ignored. Obviously, the Stoners were having monetary problems, Lelia thought with interest. Or they were very eccentric. Keeping up appearances meant dressing well, and Stoner did so—even more the gallant than Lord Hunt had been. And he saw to it that his womenfolk were beautifully gowned, the wine cellar well stocked, and his wife amply supplied with drugs. . . .

The park outside, from what she could see of it, was equally well tended. A finely clipped yew hedge bordered the front of the house. Alongside the northern exposure was an Elizabethan garden done in the Italian style. A flight of steps running down from a raised terrace led to graveled walks and knot gardens. Dwarf box hedges enclosed intricate flower beds, clustering around the focal point—an elaborate sundial. A handsome arrangement, but Lelia didn't care for it. It was too contrived.

The great avenue of oaks, sweeping up to the house, mingled with ilex, a dark evergreen, and beech as it wound past the Italian garden. One branch of the road forked down to an artificial lake bordered by copper beeches, while the main avenue ran through the park into what Lelia assumed was the timbered area. All she could see from a distance—it was much too cold for such a long stroll—was an extraordinary row of holly trees leading off from the main path.

Jared Stoner, Lelia saw only at meals or when his daily ride coincided with her walk. He spent his working hours in his study or touring the estate. Occasionally, he failed to come down to dinner, and then it was whispered that he was holed up in his bedroom with half a dozen bottles of brandy, and a strict order to his valet not to be called until "the day after." He made trips into King's Lynn or Norwich—a combination of business and pleasure—or even into London, if the mood seized him. Lelia studied him as a painter might his subject, searching for his weaknesses. Enjoying it.

The weaknesses in the household extended to his women. Certainly, the most vulnerable was his wife.

Because of Lady Margaret's varied moods, Lelia came to the conclusion that she was taking a much larger dose than her husband suspected. Either it was coming from an outside source, or she was changing the amount daily. Keeping a careful log of her dosage, Lelia watched for anything suspicious—a package slipped to her ladyship when the dressmaker came, or a vial mixed in with clean linen—to no avail. Pitying her misery and wretched marriage, Lelia decided to leave her alone. After all, the quarrel was not with the wife but with Stoner and his immediate family, and she had been forbidden to interfere with the woman's destructive tendencies. So, that left her free to tend her patient without a qualm.

Kezia Stoner was another problem altogether. The aging beauty detested Lelia on sight, and the younger woman made a point of effacing herself in Mrs. Stoner's presence. Apparently, she ran the household, because Lelia saw no evidence of a housekeeper—indeed, the staff was surprisingly small for such an estate, which again suggested a penurious situation. Jared, she adored, though Lelia often felt that she doted on his physical beauty and disliked the man. And she was clever. She never crossed him in his black moods, and never tried to dominate him—a casual word dropped rather than a frontal attack was her chosen method. To his face, she was all sweetness and loving charm, but behind his back out came the serpent's tongue, and she would rip him apart, frequently abetted by Lady Margaret. Daphne would defend him, but they would chop her down. Stoner, it seemed, was like his father—preoccupied with liquor, gambling, and women. Yet Tobias' widow lashed herself into a frenzy, blaming her son for the deterioration of Richmond Hill. Her husband would never have made such a mess of things, she claimed.

Daphne was a delightful creature, without malice, but quite vapid. Her education had been sadly neglected, and her pretty head stuffed with a pseudo-artistic, domestic potpourri. Such dilettantism sustained her

for only a minute's serious conversation; but goodwill and a warm heart lay behind the timorous smile, and to a man who asked not much from a woman, she would make an admirable wife. Lelia judged that Daphne was a year or two younger than herself. Interesting that she still was not married. Was it lack of a large dowry, or a long engagement?

Lelia Savage was pleased with her discoveries. For one bent on revenge, this house offered ample opportunity. The big question was where to direct her energy—where to plant the poison. And then to sit quietly back and watch everything come tumbling down. . . .

Weeks went by. Winter retreated to an early spring, and the hedgerows became white with mayflowers or purple with lavender. Stoner came and went on his innumerable travels. Then one day he returned from London and summoned Mrs. Lockwood to his study. Expecting a list of petty grievances from Lady Margaret, Lelia entered in a nettled state and found him in shirt sleeves, standing at the windows, gazing out across the Italian garden. He seemed in a foul temper.

Not looking at her, he snapped: "Come in, and shut the door."

Complying with his orders, she approached the desk.

"Mrs. Lockwood, what was your maiden name?"

Her heart began to beat rapidly.

"Well?"

"Savage," she whispered.

"Lelia Savage?" He flicked her a cool glance.

She nodded.

"Haven't we met before?" His voice was clear and distinct, a taunting reminder of that drunken evening.

"No, I have no recollection of it."

Hands behind his back, he swung around. "Well, I have a very good recollection of it, Miss Savage," he mocked. "One doesn't forget a woman like you. Nine years ago, I met you with Lord Hunt."

Still, she held her ground. "Your memory astonishes me, sir, I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes, you do, Lelia Savagel!" he cried angrily. "Stephen, Lord Hunt, the Marquis of Stowbridge was your lover—fathered your bastard."

All color drained from her face. Feeling faint and terribly alarmed, she put out a hand to steady herself on a chair. Instantly, he was beside her.

"You harlot! You cheat," he said in a deadly voice. "How dare you come here with your lies! Creeping into this house like a thief—"

A cry broke from her, and she turned and fled to the door, but he cut her off and bolted it. Like a trapped animal, Lelia moved back into the room's center, looking for another means of escape, for a weapon . . . Coming up behind her, his big hands grasped the bone pins holding up her chignon.

"You're not dressed to catch a man's fancy now, but we'll get rid of the disguise."

Pins fell to the carpet. Her blonde hair tumbled down in great, soft curls.

Running his fingers through them, he gave a thin smile. "I've never forgotten it—like the sun."

Stalling for time, desperately frightened, Lelia began to question him. "How did you find out?"

A gleam of amusement lightened his somber expression. "In London, my pet. You reminded me of someone . . . Mrs. Lockwood rang false. No ship foundered in Cornwall when you said it did, so I picked up your trail. Lady Hunt remains furious. As does her nephew. Now, there are two warrants out for your arrest." Raising an eyebrow, he added softly, "Foolish of you to get involved with the actor Jermyn, but you were positively irresponsible to cohabit with the young doctor Michael Houghton. He's well connected and that affair just stirred up memories of the earlier one with Lord Hunt. So you ran out on Houghton, is that it?"

Not a shred of pity would she get from him. "He was going to be married," Lelia replied shakily. "I simply left."

"Leaving half of London desolate?"

Her eyes flashed. "If that's how you see it."

Now, he almost purred. "And came to me?"

"To Richmond Hill."

"Why?"

"I wanted peace."

Stoner's dark eyes were incredulous. The handsome face tight with rage. "Perhaps, you came to steal our family jewels, eh?"

"No!" Lelia shouted. "Damn you! No, I never stole them. Stephen gave them to me. And his wife has pursued me like a fury ever since, because I bore him a son . . ." Heartsick, she looked at him. "What are you going to do? Are you going to send me back to London?" Real tears glistened in her eyes.

Had she looked at him with love at that moment, would their lives have been changed? It was a fraction of a second which never ceased to torment her. For what he saw was hatred. Towering over her with a pensive look, his eyes searched hers, moving then to her mouth, her throat, and to the bodice of her plain dress. Lelia remembered her dead parents, her drowned child, and threw up a barrier of loathing against him. And one kiss might have saved them. . . .

"No, you'll stay here, Miss Savage, but I want no more pretense—" In sudden fury, Stoner ripped her blouse in half. Jeering at her horrified cries, he then tore the chemise apart, exposing her breasts.

Shame turned to outrage. Her fury matched his. Proud and defiant, she stood before him, stripped to the waist, coldly watching his mouth grow taut with desire, listening to his hard breathing.

"It's time you began earning your living around here," he muttered. Picking Lelia up in his arms, he carried her over to a horsehair couch that stood next a side wall and flung her down. She fought against him as best she could with her nails and teeth, but it was hopeless. He was too strong. Stephen's rape had been cruel, but at least it had been an act of passion giving him pleasure. Stoner's rape was an act of vengeance, utterly degrading, bestial. Any feelings of tenderness or compassion that she might have felt for the man were

wiped out in an ocean of searing pain. As he tore her clothes and his own, frantically ramming himself into her, she bit her fist to stifle her moans. Noticing her anguish, Stoner put a hand over her mouth as a gag. Just when she reached the breaking point, the torment ended. He shuddered against her with a low cry, resting the full weight of his body on hers for a long moment. Then he arose, and Lelia lay crumpled, broken and dispirited, her body feeling as if it had been pierced to the heart.

"Now, get out and leave me," he said icily, his back turned.

Sitting up on the couch, Lelia smoothed her clothes, vainly trying not to weep aloud, but the tears ran down her cheeks like a waterfall. Scattered on the oriental carpet lay her bone pins. Gathering them together, she pinned up her hair as best she could, then stared at the ruined bodice. "I need a pin," she said dully, wiping away her tears. "Can you give me something?"

He held out a hand. His stick-pin. With trembling fingers, Lelia took it and secured the torn fragments together. Silently, she left.

10.



ESCAPING to her tiny refuge, Lelia slammed the door shut, and hunted in the crooked bureau drawer for a small bottle of brandy kept for emergencies. Usually, it calmed a nervous client—she seldom indulged. Now, with a shaking hand, she poured herself a stiff drink, gagging at the taste, but it soon stopped the frenzied rage and tears, allowing her to think clearly. Lady

Margaret had mildly overdosed herself today and would sleep through dinner. Not a serious incident, but one which was happening with increasing frequency. Her maid would keep watch, and that gave Lelia the remainder of the afternoon and evening to set her plan in motion.

Warmed and revitalized by the brandy, Lelia took a sponge bath, changed her clothes and redid her hair, still feeling his heavy weight. Damn him! He'd bruised her mouth, she saw in the fly-spattered mirror. Running a hand over her body, she winced. Not since that nightmare in St. James's Square had she ached so much. Sinking to her knees, she swore on her dead child's memory that she would kill Jared Stoner.

"So help me God if I don't!" she sobbed. "Give me strength . . . Help me find a way . . ." A spasm of pain bit into her, and she clenched her teeth, trying to override it. Rummaging again in the bureau, she dug out a small packet. Its contents—a white powder—made her smile. A colleague had given it to her as a gift: either to use as a face lotion, or to dispatch an annoyance. Well, Stoner certainly fitted into that category. His Nemesis had come to destroy him. It was a pity she couldn't kill him with a kiss. . . .

Once more she examined herself in the cracked mirror. Some makeup to cover the bruises and no one would notice, but she felt damnably chilled. Probably getting a cold. Throwing on a shawl, Lelia slipped out of her room and down the backstairs to the basement level. Her luck held. None of the staff saw her heading for the wine cellar. She hoped it wasn't locked, as was normal. But life was so casual in this great house, and the servants so few in number that the proprieties were not always observed. Thanks to her explorations, she knew exactly where to go, and fortunately, the door stood closed but not barred. She even knew where the lantern was kept—on a peg by the door.

Whipping inside, Lelia fumbled around in the dark for the matchbox. A cheerful beam of light revealed a good stock of wine. She had only to uncork a bottle,

pour in the powder, then recork it. Possibly, the butler might notice that it had been tampered with. Best get a bottle of brandy. Stoner usually handled those himself, and frequently he was so drunk he wouldn't notice anything amiss. Picking out a bottle, she opened it carefully and held it up to the light, watching in fascination as the arsenic sank into the liquid. Then she replaced it among the other bottles.

When she emerged, Lelia was trembling with excitement and fury. It was strange that she had never once considered that he might try and break her by rape. On any other level she could defeat him, but not that one. Despite the horror, perhaps it was for the best. The memory of that cruel abuse would spur her revenge, giving her no rest until his death.

Next, Lelia went out to the stables, waiting in the shadows until the grooms headed for their tea in the great house. She had seen Stoner on horseback often enough to know which were his saddles. He had a favorite, but occasionally switched, and it was the second one that she chose. Using a knife, she slit a strap so that eventually it would give way.

Her head was beginning to throb, but there was one last trap to lay—the most complicated. Touring Richmond Hill, Lelia had briefly explored parts of the closed wings. An incomplete set of keys hung in the porter's room off the grand staircase. After much trial and error, she had found one which opened the door leading into the other half of the western wing. Beyond, the chambers were not locked. In shocked amazement, she had strolled through long neglected rooms. But a pretense was kept up. The mullioned windows sparkled—in case a stranger peered in from the outside, threadbare furniture stood in orderly groups on faded rugs, while the lovely wainscoting rotted slowly away, out of sight.

Eccentricity or financial disaster? Lelia Savage still didn't know. Nor did she know what had happened to the thousands of pounds Tobias Stoner had wrung from her desperate father. . . .

She had made one other discovery that afternoon.

Now, she stepped into this wing with murder in her heart. Swiftly walking through the first enormous rooms, Lelia pulled open the door leading to the south wing. Here the rooms were equally large, except for a stretch of wall containing a stout, iron-banded door. She had first thought it an anteroom, but it was something far more dramatic.

She had tugged at the ring with both hands that day, and finally, the door had swung open. A stone staircase twisted away into the pitch darkness of one of the huge old towers. Stoner was the only person who visited this area—undoubtedly, the oldest section of the house. Never had she seen anyone else in the vicinity, and a number of burnt matches suggested that he'd used the stairs at some point. On that first day Lelia, too, had lit a candle and had climbed those stairs, with her heart in her mouth, until she reached the top. A second door, equally heavy, was locked. Presumably, it led to the tower room, which Stoner might have converted into a strongroom. On her way down, her skirt had caught on one of the steps, and leaning over to dislodge it, she noticed something peculiar about the step. Seen from a certain angle, it was slightly out of alignment with the others. It piqued her curiosity. Setting her candle down, she ran her fingers over the step carefully, feeling every crevice, and was not unduly startled to find a hidden mechanism, which loosened the step so that it flung up like a lid. Inside was a pivot, and intrigued by what might happen, she unscrewed it. To her amazement, the riser fell. Replacing the step, she gently leaned on it and it collapsed under her, almost pitching her down the stairs. Tightening the pivot, she reassembled the whole thing, tested it with her full weight, and then hastily fled the tower. She had read of such protective devices, but to encounter one was unnerving.

Now, on this murderous day, Lelia went to bait the last trap. Up the narrow circular stairs she crept, almost to the top. Anyone falling down this flight would roll right to the bottom. So smooth were the walls that

nothing could be grasped to halt the plunge. With great care she loosened the third step from the top and released the pivot within. Putting the riser back down, it looked like any other step. It would be thought that ordinary wear and tear had destroyed it. It would be called a tragic accident due to an ancient, defective mechanism—nothing more.

"Break your beautiful neck, my darling," she whispered. "And may your death be instantaneous—" She began to laugh—a frightening sound in that wild tower. Scooping up the matches and candle, Lelia hurried down the stairs, collapsing suddenly in a violent paroxysm of grief and shame. The memory of her little boy ate at her until she thought she'd go mad. In fury, she beat against the stone walls until her knuckles were bloodied.

The candle had sputtered out. She must have fainted. Her forehead was on fire. God! where was she? Was she in the black room in St. James's Square? Was it a nightmare? No, she could feel the icy stone stairs. How far did she have to go until she reached the bottom? The door had shut behind her . . . that's why it was so dark. Only the memory of Jared Stoner kept her sane at that point. Fear weakened her, beckoning her down those stairs, but her awful hatred kept her feverish brain cool, made her numb fingers search for the candle and matchbox. She relit the candle. She had a third of the staircase to go. Sick and dizzy, she staggered to her feet and somehow returned to her room without meeting anyone. A lumpy mattress sagged under her . . . and she remembered nothing else until Bridget shook her awake.

"Mrs. Lockwood, it's time for dinner."

From far away, she heard her voice, "I can't. I feel so ill."

Bridget's head bobbed like a Japanese doll, and then Lelia was alone in the dark until a broad shaft of light illuminated the scared face of a house parlormaid, plaintively asking if she wished a doctor?

All the air was crushed out of her lungs. Her hair

was on fire. "Can you help me get to bed?" Lelia wheezed. "I can't manage my clothes . . ."

Eventually, someone sent for the doctor, fearing meningitis. Agree, he said, and for a week she was confined to bed, seriously ill with a raging fever and intermittent chills. It was impossible to know, afterwards, how much she had rambled. Bridget, who sat with her and whose dull honesty would have forced a confession, said only that she cried often in her sleep. Meals were brought which she ignored; she drank a little liquid, that was all. Lelia remembered only the violent nightmares, so chilling that all memory of her vengeance against Jared Stoner slipped from her mind. If they came at all she placed them as dream fragments. Thus, she recalled faintly in waking moments a brandy bottle—a saddle . . . But it was all part of a devil's dream. Of the staircase, she remembered nothing. But the hatred remained.

Lelia Savage thought she was dead. Her parents stood at her bedside, radiant in their beautiful youth, embracing her little boy, whose soft curls tossed in the wind. She held out a hand to touch them, and the fever broke. . . .

Awakening to the ugly reality of that room, she wept and cursed herself for still being alive. And in that house . . . Oh, God, she wanted someone to hold her so badly. She was so lonely. All her dear ones dead. She had no one to love, and she wanted love—craved it before she died. Hugging herself in that miserable bed, wave after wave of hatred assaulted her as love's promise died. Again she heard her mother's voice: *Destroy Richmond Hill*. And knew her destiny.

Lelia Savage remembered everything—all the long litany of griefs—everything except for those three deadly snares.

A week's grace was given to Lelia to recuperate, but long before that she was back, pale but efficient, tending Lady Margaret. Stoner was in London, having decamped at the onslaught of her illness. Rumor said he'd be away for some time, which relieved Lelia's mind.

That gave her sufficient opportunity to start work on the ladies of Richmond Hill.

Lady Margaret, she wasn't going to touch. She was weak and already doing a perfect job of destroying herself without any added help. Just being married to Jared Stoner was punishment enough, Lelia grimly decided. She would go to hell in her own way. Kezia Stoner was a tough, unapproachable woman, who could only be hurt through her children. The chink in the armor was Daphne, painful though it might be. Such a sweet creature, who had brought Lelia books and fruit when she was sick. So fresh . . . so young . . . so kind, and with such a trusting outlook on life. Lelia had been like that at sixteen, before Lord Hunt had broken her spirit. Why shouldn't she take the light out of Daphne's eyes? She was asking for it. She was like a ripe plum, falling into the older woman's lap with her charming, gushing confidences. At every occasion she sought out Lelia's company to pour forth a little secret, exposing the fragile recesses of her heart. Stoner, it seems, wanted her to marry his oldest and dearest friend—of all people!—Adam Jeffrey. But, alas, Daphne was hopelessly enamored of Frederic Stiller—a man Lelia knew from intimate acquaintance as one with a rakehell reputation. He could drink even Stoner under the table, and was considered an insatiable lecher. Wonderfully handsome, if you liked the type—they dubbed him the red-haired dragoon—he was utterly irresponsible. He'd already run through his mother's fortune and was about to lose his father's. In Lelia's opinion, Daphne had been picked less for her delightful personality than for a supposedly large dowry. Meeting at a Christmas ball last year, they had instantly been smitten. Letters and small gifts were exchanged, and now the courtship was approaching a fevered climax. Knowing that she was unofficially betrothed to Adam Jeffrey, Stiller was trying to persuade her to elope with him.

"What do you want me to do?" Lelia asked Daphne quietly, as they strolled up and down the graveled walks in the Italian garden.

"Mrs. Lockwood—" Tears trembled on her lashes. "I feel you were happy with your husband. Am I right?"

"Yes," Lelia breathed, without a scruple. "We were deeply in love."

"Well, then you know how I feel," she replied, a shade vehemently. "Adam Jeffrey is the kindest of men, but I don't love him. When he touches me, it's not like—"

"The other?"

She nodded, tears rolling down her soft cheeks. With a handkerchief, Lelia wiped them away.

"Shouldn't I marry the man I love?"

Pity the man would make her life such a hell. "If you don't, you'll be miserable." Gently, Lelia took her by the shoulders. "You do know that you'll have to go to bed with him, don't you?" Daphne's scarlet face showed that she understood, but this one had been to boarding school and picked up a few facts the young Lelia had never known. Looking her straight in the eye, Lelia added coldly, "It could be very unpleasant with someone you didn't love."

Daphne flinched and remained silent. Then a very tremulous whisper: "Will you help me?"

Lelia remembered how she'd pleaded with Christine Marshall. "Yes, of course, my dear. What can I do?"

"Freddie will soon make final plans. Whenever you go into King's Lynn, you can leave a letter at my modiste's and fetch anything in return. He writes so frequently—I can't get in to town often enough."

"What if your brother finds out?"

Seizing her friend's hands in desperation, Daphne cried, "Nothing ties it to you. You go in for Margaret. He won't suspect you—even when I go. I'm the one he's watching . . ."

And so Lelia caught her first little fish.

Late one afternoon, returning from a last spell of duty with Lady Margaret before dinner, Lelia discovered that her room had been cleaned out. Sum-

moning Bridget in great alarm, she learned that she had been moved. The hideous little room had been exchanged for a handsome, spacious one in the east wing. She thought it odd to be isolated in one of the closed areas, but so beautiful was the chamber and so entrancing the view of the park that she offered no complaint. Indeed, she was speechless at her good luck. Delicately carved wainscoting, ornate plaster work, an elegant oak fireplace, an enormous fourposter, and a few lovely pieces of furniture—all this for a servant, a lady's companion.

She ought to have known who was behind it.

Stoner was with them again that night when they gathered in the drawing room—the first time Lelia had seen him since the rape. As handsome and arrogant as ever, not once did he glance in her direction. During the meal he downed his customary bottle of wine. Unusually tense, he snapped several times at his mother. Of London, he said nothing. His only news was that Adam Jeffrey would be paying a visit. Daphne grew pale and aimlessly twisted her napkin.

Annoyed by her sighs, Stoner leaned toward her, his voice loud. "It's the only way, Daphne. You know that."

She glanced beseechingly at her mother, who pouted. "Will you never accept the blame, Jared?" Kezia asked sharply.

His face went dead white, and he strode quickly out of the room.

Waiting until he'd gone, Mrs. Stoner grimaced. "If only he had his father's business acumen, we wouldn't be in this mess."

"Perhaps, he received too much of his father's . . . other talents," said Lady Margaret with languid spite.

Kezia turned on her, glowering. Only she could attack her son. "Come, come, Margaret, we all know that if you'd pleased him in bed your life would be far different now."

"That has nothing to do with it. It was my health and you know it," the other retorted.

"Lucky for you, wasn't it?" his mother sneered.

"Your son is gross."

Daphne and the companion sat flushed with embarrassment. Lelia, because of that brutal rape, and Daphne because she was genuinely fond of her brother and detested this eternal wrangling between mother and wife. No wonder he was constantly fleeing such an atmosphere, Lelia thought. And what irony for a sensualist to be married to a woman who found him physically repulsive. Lelia could almost have pitied him. . . .

Excusing herself at the end of that unpleasant meal, she saw Lady Margaret up to her suite, and then slipped back downstairs to borrow a book from the well-stocked library shelves. Her way led her past Stoner's study. His door stood open, and against her will she took a quick glance inside. A full brandy glass and the ever-present decanter were on the desk. Pacing the floor was the master of the house. Violent and desperate was his mood.

Selecting a book, Lelia ran up the back staircase to her enchanting room. As was her custom she read for a while prior to retiring. In a comfortable wing chair next the fireplace, she sped through a good fifty pages before stopping for the night. Dressed in an elaborate nightgown and peignoir, she sat down at the dressing table and began to brush her hair, watching her image with pleasure in the large mirror. Such a luxury had not been granted her since the West End days at Queen Street. It was a beautifully carved, gilt-painted mirror, reflecting a large portion of the room, including the fireplace. Counting the strokes, Lelia studied the intricate scrollwork on the mantelpiece, following each curve and flourish until she noticed a movement—a shadow, she thought. The next moment she saw him standing there—Jared Stoner, wearing a red velvet dressing gown. With brush poised in midair, she waited.

He strolled toward her.

She put down the brush and turned around.

"Well, Lelia Savage, do you like the room?"

"You had me moved?"

"The passage connects with my bedroom." He smiled. "I thought it appropriate that my new mistress be more accessible to me."

"I don't want you," she said tightly. "I want nothing to do with you. What if I walk out right now?"

His eyes were cold and hard. "Then I'll call the police." As she made a movement to get up, he put out a restraining hand. "Two warrants are out for your arrest. I don't think you stand a chance against Lady Hunt and her family. You'd probably get ten years, or you can remain here—" He paused. "As my mistress."

She stared at him, rigid with shock.

His hand burned into her shoulder. "I want you, and I always take what I want." A spasm of emotion crossed his face. "Now, what's it to be—prison or a life here with me at Richmond Hill?"

She knew when she was beaten. "You," she faltered.

"Good," he said briskly. "Now, take off your clothes."

Hating him, Lelia stood up and slowly stripped, keeping her eyes on his face. His lustful eyes were no different from any other man's. With shaking fingers, she unbuttoned the peignoir, letting it fall to the floor. Turning back to the mirror, she undid her nightdress, and as it slid to her feet she straightened, her long hair falling in waves, covering her nakedness.

"Do I please you?" she asked. Turning with a smile, she flung back her hair and stood before him naked.

Never before had she seen such desire in a man's face. It awed her. Finally, he found his voice. "Come here," he said hoarsely.

Lelia went to her enemy and embraced him as his loving mistress, wishing that she could drive a dagger through his devil's heart. At her touch, he took her in his arms in a violent embrace and kissed her hungrily. The intensity of his passion surprised her. Then he swept her over to the bed.

"Don't fake with me, love," he whispered.

But dissemble she did, as she had with all of them, feigning an ardor she could not feel. When the act was done and she lay trembling and downcast, he left her, his face dark with anger.

"No pretense next time, Lelia Savage." He swore softly under his breath. "I know you hate me, and I'd rather have honest hatred than a sham affection."

"Damn you!" she hissed.

He grinned. "That's better." And vanished into the secret passage.

Leaping from the bed, Lelia flung on her nightclothes and tore over to the panel. Her fingers probed every inch of carving and the panels themselves, but she couldn't find the lever. After an hour's fruitless search, she returned to bed, torn between laughter and tears. It was like being in a brothel again. Was she to be constantly on call for him? How could she defeat such a man? Her *lover*, who made her a virtual prisoner in his house, who showed her no more mercy than the executioner does to the condemned. Like the serpent who forgets where it left its sting, but must go on and on biting, she spat out a new poison. Fall in love with me, Jared Stoner. Fall in love with me, she repeated endlessly in the dark. . . .

A few nights later he came again, and when Lelia complained that his hands hurt her, he sneered.

"Not the hands of a gentleman, eh?"

"Frankly not. They're too rough," she said peevishly, staring at them. "My God! What have you been doing? Farming?"

"Yes," he answered with great bitterness. "How the hell do you think the food you eat gets on your plate?"

She looked bewildered. "From your laborers."

Angry fatigue made his voice husky. "I am the farmer." And he used her very roughly that night to punish her for such insolence.

As he was leaving, she asked in disgust, "Does it give you pleasure to act the brute?"

"Not really," he replied in a flat tone. "But when I'm done with you, I'll have wiped out the memory of every other man in your life."

"With cruelty?" she cried out, as the panel swung shut.

Had she the money, Lelia would have flown at that point and abandoned her revenge. She feared Jared Stoner, hating him not only as her enemy but as a man. No charm would send him lovesick into her arms, and the degradation he was heaping on her overwhelmed any retribution she might inflict on him. If she could only find one thing—one person—to trigger the foundation's collapse. . . .

He walked into Lelia's life the next day—Adam Jeffrey. Actually, she was very nervous meeting him again, wondering if he would remember his visit to Wickford, but then she had been a fourteen-year-old girl, radiantly innocent. Now she greeted him as a cynical and bitter woman almost twenty-six years old. Stoner brought him up to see Lady Margaret, who was reclining on the couch in happy anticipation. After an affectionate welcome, he looked at Lelia with a slight start as Stoner introduced them. Coming forward, he shook her hand with an easy grace.

"Mrs. Lockwood." He was smiling. "How's your patient?"

No, she was wrong. He hadn't recognized her. Just clear, friendly eyes. "She's having a very good day," she replied.

"Then I think that calls for a big lunch, Margaret, and a ride in the countryside. The trees are blooming and will intoxicate you."

Like two children, they laughed delightedly, sharing secrets. Glancing at Stoner, Lelia noticed that even he seemed amused. Obviously, Jeffrey was one of those rare people gifted with the ability to please almost any one. How he'd lighted up her poor dead mother's face! Still a stunning man, he was about six feet tall, with a mass of curly hair now more grey than blond, rugged, arresting features, a good cleft in his chin emphasizing

the fine mouth, and penetrating grey eyes. Personally, Lelia thought Daphne was making a wicked mistake. What Jeffrey lacked apparently was Stiller's ardor. He had too much common sense to waste on any excess emotion—a quality which made him a success in commerce, but a failure with ladies who preferred fire to ice.

In Jeffrey's presence, Jared Stoner relaxed, basking in his friendship, laughing and voluble, totally unlike his usual reserved self. Together, they journeyed to Norwich, rode over to Yarmouth, and King's Lynn. Even Kezia unbent, as Jeffrey's good humor spread over the household like a magic elixir. Only Daphne, his fiancée, remained stubbornly unmoved.

Jeffrey had been at Richmond Hill for over a week, when one afternoon, as the two men rode off to Hunstanton for a late lunch, Daphne begged Lelia to go for a walk with her on her break. Instead of a stroll in the Italian garden, she took the companion's arm and led her down the serpentine path to the lake. And there amid the shimmering beauty of the copper beeches, she unburdened her distraught heart.

Knowing her anxiety, Lelia began the conversation with a light laugh. "Does your brother really farm?"

"Yes," she sighed, her face reddening in shame. "And he hates it, but there's no one else. We were very badly hit in the agricultural depression. Most of our tenants left for London or the factory towns, and the ones remaining were not good farmers, Jared felt, so he let them go. He does the work himself with one or two assistants." Tears shone in her big eyes. "It wouldn't be so bad if Margaret and my mother didn't nag him so much about it. They're ashamed of him. Is it his fault if he has such rotten luck?"

"You love him very much, don't you?"

"Yes, and that's what makes it so awful, Lelia. He wants me to marry Adam."

Lelia stared out across the lake, dreaming of Wickford, her voice low. "I don't understand."

"Well, Adam is terribly rich. Mother says he has the

Midas touch. It just keeps multiplying. And in the marriage settlement—"Lelia looked up sharply. "He's agreed to restore Richmond Hill as a gift to me."

"Very generous and loving."

"Nothing matters to Jared except Richmond Hill," she cried in anguish. "It would break his heart if I ran away with Freddie."

Lelia gave her a sideways look. "And what about your heart?"

An angry flush suffused the pale cheeks. "Well, he's selling me, isn't he? Isn't he?"

"It happens all the time, my dear." Lelia's tone was blunt. "In a man's world, we are quite powerless. Weren't you taught to obey? To suffer and be silent?"

She nodded, her eyes flashing. "I don't know what to do. I like Adam, but I don't love him. I would do anything for Jared, but not that. I want Freddie." She broke into a storm of weeping.

Lelia waited until the flood had abated, then spoke quietly. "Since he's such an old friend of your brother's, don't you think Mr. Jeffrey might lend him the money even if you married someone else?"

A glimmer of hope shone in the poor creature's face. She gulped. "He might. Yes, it's possible."

Sitting down on the grass, Lelia closed her eyes, luxuriating in the warmth of the sun. "So you could marry your beloved and not worry."

Daphne joined her, grasping her hand with pathetic eagerness. "You were happy, weren't you? And it's wonderful to be with the man you love?"

Astonishingly, tears of pain and rage filled Lelia's eyes. She thought her heart would break with longing, but Daphne attributed this unexpected distress to memories of her dead husband, and she gave Lelia's hand a comforting squeeze. Such a tender, loving soul, Lelia thought. I hate to sacrifice her. But marriage to Frederic Stiller would deal Stoner a mortal blow.

Composing herself, she probed delicately. "Are you afraid to elope?"

"Yes, I've been putting it off." Daphne wrung her

hands. "I wanted to take another look at Adam . . ." After a long pause, she said, "It must be horrible to have a child by a man you don't love."

Again, the knife twisted in Lelia's heart. She nodded, unable to speak.

"I don't think he loves me. He's really very cold . . ." An inward glow touched the blue eyes. "When are you going into King's Lynn?"

"Tomorrow."

"Well, I'll write and tell him that I'm ready . . ." Taking Lelia's arm, she led her back to the house.

And while Lelia Savage was advising this young woman to make a disastrous marriage, Daphne grew more distant toward Adam Jeffrey. And he, biding his time, gently refrained from pressing his suit. Sometimes, Lelia had the feeling he might be having second thoughts about the engagement, but was too kind to break it off. Curiously, neither Stoner nor his mother noticed this awkward little minuet, and Lelia gave Daphne much credit for handling it so skillfully. An apt pupil, that one.

Spring was well on its way. It was now warm enough to open the windows wide at night and breathe in the heady odor of lilacs and honeysuckle. Jeffrey had been at Richmond Hill for several weeks, and Stoner had not touched Lelia once during that time. She was beginning to hope it had been a passing affair, and that his attention had turned to someone else.

One evening, feeling unwell, she retired to bed early, and lay tossing and turning in the great bed. A sudden noise made her sit up. This wing was not lit by gas, and each night regrettably she had to extinguish her oil lamp to conserve fuel. For a long moment, she saw absolutely nothing, and then a candle flickered by the fireplace, throwing dancing shadows against a gaping recess and the walls beyond. As he approached the bed, she saw his likeness in the mirror.

"No, please—not tonight. Leave me alone," she begged. "I'm indisposed."

The candle highlighted his proud, sensuous face. A frown of annoyance touched his expression. Then it vanished.

"Very well," he said with a shrug. "I'll just hold you."

Putting the candle down on the bedside table, he took off his robe and got into bed with her. Trembling with rage and fear, Lelia forced a smile of welcome. As he touched her face, she winced. Gently, he gathered her into his arms.

"Now, sleep, little one."

Fighting an urge to pull away from his nakedness, she muttered, "I can't."

"Oh, why not?"

"I have insomnia."

"And you also suffer from nightmares, don't you?" he asked, running a hand through her hair. "My servants told me you were quite tormented during your illness."

She nodded, dumbly, and he caressed her face with a thoughtful touch, as if really seeing it for the first time. "What are you so frightened of?"

Lelia found it too ironic that Jared Stoner—of all people—should ask such a question. With a bitter laugh, she cried, "My life."

A look of great sadness and shame contorted his face. Bending down, he kissed her forehead, her eyelids, and her mouth.

"I never meant to hurt you. I never meant it to be like that." His voice was husky. His hands began to stroke her back. "I won't hurt you anymore, Lelia. I promise you. Rest against me, sweet." And he pressed her head to his chest.

Worn out, she closed her eyes, oblivious to everything except his tranquil voice, the pressure of his hands on her back, and his heartbeat. Just before falling asleep, she remembered reaching out for him. . . .

In the middle of the night, Lelia woke up, as she did so often—not knowing where she was or with whom. Her whimpers of distress roused the sleeping man.

"Oh, God, where am I? Where am I?" she moaned.

"At Richmond Hill, Lelia, with me—Jared Stoner," he replied, holding her tightly. "Is it the dark which frightens you?"

"I'm afraid . . . I'm so afraid I'll wake up in that room again—the one with the mirrors . . . in St. James's Square . . ." No need to explain the horror. He knew, and rocked her in his arms until the tears dried on her cheeks. Then he got up and lit a lamp.

"I'll see that you always have a supply of oil, so that you can keep one burning at night."

She gave him her first real smile. "I'm more afraid of the dark than of fire."

Returning to bed, he embraced her. "I'm here, Lelia. I'm here," he said tenderly. "Sleep, darling, sleep . . ."

Next morning, Lelia rose to brilliant sunshine and an empty bed. The dreamlike quality of that midnight encounter made her think that she had only imagined it. There wasn't a shred of kindness or compassion in Jared Stoner's nature. But a black hair on the pillow indicated that the dream had been real and not a fancy. And downstairs at luncheon their eyes met briefly, and he gave her a faint smile, his dark eyes possessive.

Tremulous feelings of hatred mingled with another emotion—one so alien that she couldn't understand it. With a dazed brain and numbed ear, Lelia sat listening to Lady Margaret in a raging, daylong tirade castigating her stupidity, inefficiency, cruelty, unkindness, etc. So preoccupied had Lelia been with Daphne these last weeks—encouraging her to elope—that she had relaxed her vigilance over Lady Margaret. Now, in the early afternoon, she stared down in dismay at the almost empty decanters.

"You'll have to get more," yelled her mistress.

"No, m'lady, you know I don't go in until Monday. You're taking too much. Your husband will never allow it."

"My husband!" The words were a screech. A Meissen figurine went sailing against the mantel. "You watch out

for him," her ladyship hissed, as Lelia knelt to recover the broken fragments. "He gets his filthy hands on every woman entering this house." Her satin shoe trod on a piece Lelia was about to retrieve. "Has he bedded you yet?"

She froze. "I don't know what you're talking about, m'lady."

"My husband," the wife snarled, kicking the piece out of reach like a naughty child. "It was thought to be such a good match. I had the money and he had this—" She grimaced. "This great estate, and so we were wed. But he didn't want to be a landed gentleman. He wanted to grub in the City as a barrister. I couldn't stand all those awful, vulgar people, so he quit and went through my money—gambling, whoring—just like his father. Drinks, too. And he's getting worse . . ." Weeping in frustration, she groaned, "Damn it! Where's that wretched girl?"

Looking in astonishment at the maid, Hooper, Lelia asked, "Who's she talking about?"

The woman flushed. "The laundress, Mrs. Lockwood."

"She doesn't come until Monday. This is Friday." Hooper shrugged helplessly and took away the broken pieces of the figurine. A knock on the door sent Lady Margaret flying to open it. Flinging it wide, she scooped up a parcel from a woman standing on the threshold, and then slipped toward her bedroom.

Lelia intercepted her. "Excuse me, m'lady, but I'll open that for you."

"Oh, no, you won't!"

As she reached for it, Lady Margaret gave her a sharp, stinging blow across the cheek. It sent her reeling; but as her ladyship sailed into her bedroom, Lelia was hard on her heels.

"I'll take that, thank you." Lelia yanked the package away and hurried back to the sitting room. Cursing her, Lady Margaret tottered behind, watching nervously while Lelia ripped open the package and inspected each garment minutely. There were no little bottles of

laudanum smuggled in the beautiful underwear, but something quite different. Something small and thin, tucked in the bottom lining of a heavy petticoat.

"Get me the scissors," Lelia ordered Hooper.

"Bitch! I shall have you fired for such brazen conduct," her ladyship exploded.

"Your health is my responsibility." And she cut into the lovely fabric and pulled out a cigarette—then a second, and a third.

Lady Margaret burst into sobs. "For God's sake, give me one, Lelia."

The entire skirt was riddled with them. Feeling slightly ill, Lelia shook her head. "Not until I see your husband." Quickly, she slit the garment further and began filling her bag with the contraband opium cigarettes. "Is this what you've been taking all along?"

"Yes," she whined. "You've got me on too small a dose."

Lelia's eyes flashed. "It hasn't changed since I came to Richmond Hill—"

A second knock on the door interrupted them. It was a summons for Mrs. Lockwood to see the master. As Lelia gingerly touched the angry welt on her cheek, Lady Margaret jeered and made a grab for her purse.

"Don't do that again," Lelia said coolly and left her.

With her mind on the drugs, she was totally unprepared for the scene in the study. Adam Jeffrey stood grimly at the bay window, behind his friend. Stoner, pale with shock, was seated at his desk. Instantly, Lelia knew what was wrong.

"Your cheek—what happened?" Stoner asked roughly as she marched to his desk.

"I ran into something. I'm sorry . . ."

Their eyes met, and his mouth tightened, but he probed no more. Instead, he spoke in a flat voice, "My sister has eloped with a man named Frederic Stiller. Do you know anything about it?"

Lelia met his anguished gaze calmly. "No, sir. I was not her confidante."

"Mrs. Lockwood—"

"Let her be, Jared. Let her be," Jeffrey said testily. "The poor woman knows nothing." He came forward for a brief consultation. Stoner dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

Outside, Lelia leaned against the wainscoting, her knees buckling in fright. *She had done it.* But there was no sense of joy or triumph—the despairing look in Stoner's eyes had wrenched her heart. Remembering her parents and her dead child, she tried to hate him. And felt utterly desolate. . . .

Upstairs, Lady Margaret eyed her. "What did the bastard want?"

"Your husband," Lelia replied in a stilted tone, "informed me that Miss Stoner has eloped."

"Eloped? Eloped with whom?"

"With a Mr. Frederic Stiller."

Her ladyship broke into a scream of laughter, gasping, "Oh, that's rich. That'll fix Jared!" Then, pleading, "Now, give me a cigarette, dear."

"Only one—" And Lelia gave it to her not out of pity, but because she wanted a peaceful night in case he came to her.

On her afternoon break, Lelia fled from that detestable woman out of the house and down the avenue of oaks, ilex, and beeches to the path with the giant holly trees. Weeks before, on one of the first warm days of spring, she had discovered their magical secret. For some distance the path stretched into the park. The hollies, standing well over sixteen feet high, reached for one another in a prickly embrace, making such a tight hedge that it was difficult to see beyond. Apparently, they bordered a high wall of ancient red brick. At one point the wall curved away, and it occurred to Lelia that what she was looking at might be an old garden. Back she went along the trees, trying to find an entrance into the walled enclosure. Two trees were not so heavily entwined as their neighbors, and by moving sideways between them, she found herself in front of a wrought iron gate, rusted with age. Pushing it open, she stepped into an old English garden. She wept. It

was exactly like her secret garden at Wickford. Flowering trees, graveled walks, thick lanes of clipped yews, and the same quaint knots of flower beds trembling with new life. And everywhere she looked, a profusion of rose bushes and creepers climbed the moss-covered walls. This garden became her sanctuary. Whenever she felt lonely or troubled, she came to it, seeking a beloved friend.

Now, on this shattering day, she came for a remembrance of Wickford. To bolster her courage. Up and down the paths she walked, imagining David's small hand in hers and his squeals of delight as they spotted the first crocus.

"I'm sorry. Am I intruding?"

Blinking in the sun, she held up a hand to shade her eyes and saw the elegant figure of Adam Jeffrey lounging near the gate.

"No, of course not. I didn't hear you come in."

Striding toward her with an apologetic air, he said in his husky voice, "I've been watching you for some time—forgive me. It's extraordinary, but seeing you in this garden reminds me of something I haven't thought about in years."

Lelia gave him a wary glance.

He laughed. "I'm a Devon man, and in my youth I occasionally rode past a large estate. The young daughter walked in her garden—one just like this—a beautiful child with the most astonishing hair. It was just like yours . . ." A hopeful look touched his features. "You're not by any chance from Devon?"

Lelia shook her head.

"No, that would be too much of a coincidence, wouldn't it? Her mother was a lovely woman," he mused. "It's said she built the garden for her first-born. Have I upset you?"

Tears stung her eyes, and she stared at her clenched hands. "No, Mr. Jeffrey. It's just been a trying day." Her voice shook. "Trouble with Lady Margaret—"

Taking her arm, he led her to a stone bench. "Let's sit, shall we?"

"What's happening?" she asked dully.

"Well, Mr. Stoner's gone to London to try and get his sister back. Though by now, I'm sure they're married and on their way to the Continent."

"I've been so concerned about my own problems—" Pausing, she flushed, trying to express her regrets. "What I meant to say . . . is that I'm terribly sorry for you—"

"Are you?" The grey eyes gently searched hers. "Thank you, that's kind of you, my dear." Then he shrugged. "Well, personally, I think it was the best thing to happen—for me. Obviously, we weren't suited to one another, and I was beginning to fear we'd be very unhappy." He stared off into the distance. "Stoner's the one I feel sorry for. I would have helped him. Now, he won't take a penny."

She gave him a sideways look. "Is the estate badly in debt?"

"Oh my, yes. Tobias Stoner dissipated the fortune, and when Stoner inherited Richmond Hill most of Lady Margaret's dowry paid the debts. He has very little left."

Picking a tiny crocus, she held it in her hand. "Won't he accept your help?"

"No, he has too much pride, Mrs. Lockwood. You must have noticed that?"

"I hadn't really—" She dropped her eyes. "It's not my business to notice such things."

"Of course, of course," he murmured, not really listening. "He adores the house. It's the only thing he cares about. Not even his sons mean that much to him. Richmond Hill is his life." He sighed.

"What will happen?"

His long, thoughtful look was disconcerting. "I don't know. It's like trying to stanch a mortal wound with a handkerchief."

They were on their feet, walking down the path. "Lady Margaret says he gambles like his father," Lelia whispered indiscreetly.

"She despises him." He gave a snort of impatience.

"That's another of her fantasies. No, he travels to raise money, that's all. He seldom gambles, though he does drink," he added ruefully. "Pity, he never found a loving influence in his life . . ."

Lelia looked away. The wife disliked him and she—his mistress—hated him. Oh, he'd be pulled down in no time. . . .

The husky voice said softly. "You're trembling."

"Am I?" she queried, her eyes cold.

But his were gentle as he took her hand. "Think of me as your friend, Mrs. Lockwood, and if I can ever be of any help, I will be."

Lelia was touched and showed it with a warm smile, wondering at the same time how he could remember her walking in the garden, and yet not recall the visit to Wickford. Adam Jeffrey gazed down at her with his grey eyes dark, and she tactfully withdrew her hand.

In the hectic, unhappy days following, they became friends. Despite Daphne's betrayal, Jeffrey continued to remain at Richmond Hill. He hoped to be a calming influence on Jared Stoner, Lelia believed. Whenever he could manage to break away, Adam Jeffrey joined her on the afternoon walks. Frankly, she enjoyed his company in what had now become a very unpleasant environment. Stoner ignored her, Kezia Stoner barely spoke to her at all, and Lady Margaret tongue-lashed her daily. Adam Jeffrey, no snob and blessed with the great gift of putting people at their ease, relaxed her. A bright, kindhearted, charming man, he made Lelia's life tolerable. Hearing her brief history—a tissue of lies—he sympathized with her widowed plight. She thought Daphne an utter fool for leaving such a man. . . .

And then one night the ashes of her dead heart were rekindled and set on fire.

In the late hours, Lelia sat at her dressing table before the ornate mirror, brushing her hair, twisting the curls aimlessly around her fingers. Fully absorbed, she failed to hear the tiny click of the moving panel. It was the flickering light in the mirror which caught her eye.

With a gasp, she stood up. Very deliberately, his eyes never leaving hers, Stoner blew out the candle and set it down on the window ledge. By degrees, frightened and exhilarated, Lelia watched him. He stood waiting, unsmiling, without arrogance for the first time, looking as shy and awkward as she now felt. With a low cry, she called him by his Christian name, holding out her arms, and he came swiftly, his eager mouth frantic for hers, his long, hard kiss rousing her to an ardor never before known. She found herself begging for him, pleading with him to take her to bed. Undressing her, he drove her wild with excitement, kissing her body, his hands caressing and bruising her in his passion. At the moment when she could bear it no longer, he entered her and their souls met in one rapturous moment.

With eyes closed, she lay very still. "My beautiful darling," she heard him whisper as he kissed away her tears.

Lelia stared at him in wonder. "That's the first time . . ."

"Never before?" He seemed touched.

"No," and she looked into his smiling face, thinking that this was the first time she had ever seen him happy.

"That makes you infinitely precious to me," he murmured, seeking her mouth. Under his touch, her body responded.

"We must be careful, sweetheart, not to get you pregnant."

The old memory tore at her. "Don't worry," she cried brokenly. "I'm barren."

"Oh, Lelia, I'm so sorry." With a loving hand, he caressed her face, dismay darkening his features. Never expecting compassion, her agitated emotions caused her to break down. In a flood of tears, she sobbed out the whole story. Murmuring endearments, he cradled her in his arms. Gradually, tenderness changed to fervor, and they clung together in joyous abandon. Later, lying beside him, dazed and weak, Lelia wondered what in God's name was happening to her. Infatuation—

that's what it must be, she decided, and fell asleep in his embrace.

When she awoke the next morning, again she thought it a dream, but the love bites on her body proved her wrong. She flushed, thinking of him, craving him as much as Lady Margaret craved her drug. At luncheon, their eyes met covertly, and a surge of feeling passed between them so intense as to leave Lelia breathless. Then, in terror, she recalled the brandy bottle and the saddle. Of that other monstrous trap, she remembered nothing.

Excusing herself, Lelia flew out to the stables, lingering in the area until she could enter unobserved. It took a moment to find the blasted thing. When a groom appeared, she drew his attention to it in a casual voice.

"Mr. Jeffrey is riding this afternoon." Pointing to the saddle, she added, "Look at this strap. It's worn right through."

Lelia saw it taken away to be fixed and felt her heart lighten. Back she hurried to the house. Lady Margaret would be livid at her disappearance, but this was too crucial a matter to delay. Down into the basement she went, cautiously making her way to the wine cellar. It was deserted, just like the last time. She slipped inside and fumbled for the light. Like last time . . . Dear God, what else had happened? A raging headache. That she remembered. A candle—but there was no candle here, only a lantern . . . Where was the candle? You have not forgotten anything, said a cold voice in her brain. Again, she felt his hard weight, his ardent kiss stirring her senses . . .

Long moments passed while she searched for the right brandy bottle. Finding it, she smashed it to pieces on the floor. As the liquid oozed across the dark stones, Lelia saw her life's blood ebbing away. Shocked by the idea, she stood rooted. No. No, she was wrong. Not her life's blood, unless her blood was his—Jared Stoner's. Sick with fright at what she had come so close to losing, Lelia uttered a silent prayer of gratitude.

For as long as he wanted her, she was Stoner's. Why fight or question it any longer. Hadn't she already revenged herself and her family? Didn't he stand on the brink of ruin? Enough. Let the dead rest in peace. Now, Lelia Savage wanted him more than life itself. She wanted her love—Jared Stoner.

11.



STILL, Lelia judged it a physical passion, confused by its violent sentiments. As if sensing her great need, Jared came to her again that night, and they made love with a wild, fierce desperation, their bodies clinging urgently in a searing climax.

Afterward, holding her, he said, "Why did you come to Richmond Hill, my darling?"

It would be the end of their affair if he learned the truth, she thought, hesitating. "To find a haven." And she nestled closer.

He laughed tenderly. "And have you?"

"What do you think?" Her face was radiant.

"I thought the sun had walked into my room when I first saw you. That exquisite hair—"

"Hidden under a widow's bonnet," she mocked.

His voice grew serious. "I long for the day when we can walk hand in hand without fear, and make love in the daylight hours."

"Don't we have enough as we are?"

"No," he cried with surprising vehemence, and stopped her protests with more passionate lovemaking. And thus it continued night after night. Days, weeks went by. Adam Jeffrey left, then came again. Sometimes

Jeffrey and he journeyed together to try and straighten out Jared's tangled finances, and Lelia thought her heart would go mad with longing. Yet he was the first to admit what he was actually feeling.

One day in late June or early July—Lelia forgot which because all those days were eclipsed by the nights' rapture—she strode off to the meadows on her afternoon break, some distance beyond the lake and past the fields where Jared and his men toiled under the hot sun. In an angry, irritable mood, too tense for the walled garden's peace, she sought out this new spot looking for wild flowers. She found row upon row of purple loosestrife stretched out under the sky like a vast carpet of purple candles. Each tiny star-shaped flower, with a spot of gold in its heart, bore a pinprick of light. Marching down in all their glory to the marsh like seraphim, step by step, they followed the stream along its banks, disappearing into the horizon. A faint, sweet odor lingered in the air.

"So you've found the loosestrife," her lover remarked behind her. "Do you like it?"

"How beautifully they burn . . . those simple swamp flowers." With a laugh, Lelia turned to look at him and caught her breath. He was standing about a foot away, naked to the waist. Incredibly, she found herself blushing, yearning to touch him.

Smiling at her desire, he said, "Keep your eyes on the flowers. We can be seen from this road."

"Shall I go?"

"No, Lelia, not until I've said something . . . God knows why I don't wait until tonight, but I can't. Seeing you walk past the fields, I couldn't stop myself from coming." He took a step closer as she pretended to examine the meadows.

"Do you remember the *Liebestraum* and our meeting, with Lord Hunt by your side?"

She nodded.

"Learning your name, I tried desperately to find you. Days and nights of walking the London streets. No one would give me your address."

"I was his mistress," she interjected, quietly.

"If I'd found you—"

"What would you have done? Set me up in a villa in St. John's Wood?"

"I would have looked after you."

"I was pregnant with his child," she muttered harshly.

He pressed near, the warmth of his body making her tremble. "I would have looked after you and the baby," he said gently. "Perhaps, things might have gone differently, and you might have given me a child."

Tears ran down her cheeks. "Why do you torment me so?"

His hands clasped her shoulders, hurting her. "Because I adore you and I need your love. Without it, I'm lost. Say you love me," he cried passionately.

"Can't you tell by my touch how I feel about you?" Lelia replied, determined not to weaken. Her lover he might be, but she didn't trust him, and was even more afraid of love than he was.

"It's not enough."

She was shaking. In one minute she would fling herself in his arms, heedless of any passer-by, so desperate was she for his embrace. Wildly, she threw up a barrier.

"Why did you rape me?"

He winced, a look of agony in his eyes. "The thought of all those men touching you maddened me. I wanted to hurt you—"

Her voice was icy. "And what do you think they did to me?"

"They almost destroyed you." Luxuriating in the feel of her body, he bent down to kiss that elegant mouth. Then his eyes narrowed. "Go back now, love. Jeffrey's coming this way. Pick a few flowers and return. It'll be all right." As Lelia passed him, he added, "I'm going to ask him to leave. He's in the way."

"But he's your best friend," she said in an undertone.

"I won't have anyone coming between us . . ."

On her twenty-sixth birthday, as Lelia was wistfully strolling in the walled garden, she came face to face with Jared Stoner.

"Happy birthday, darling," he said tenderly.

She looked astonished. "How did you know?"

"I've been going through some of my father's records, and came across a notation of your birth. Did he really come to see you in Devon?"

"Yes, he reconciled my parents after my birth. Poor father wanted a boy." And she laughed to hide her embarrassment. "The most amusing thing—he suggested then that I be given to you in marriage. Isn't that ridiculous?"

"No, I don't think that ridiculous at all," her lover gravely answered, then: "Are you expecting Jeffrey?"

Lelia shrugged. "Well, he comes quite frequently."

"You see too much of him."

"It means nothing," she teased him. "Are you jealous?"

"Yes," he replied with a flash of temper. "He's off in a few days."

"Is that really wise?"

Looking unhappy, Jared confessed, "Lelia, I had to do it. We're getting to the point where we're very vulnerable. I can't hide my feelings anymore, and Jeffrey's clever. Don't let that bland manner fool you. He's only returning to Devon a few weeks early, and he'll be back again in September . . ." Abruptly, his mood brightened. "Now, I must give you a present." And his lips brushed her forehead. "I love you, Lelia . . ." Words spoken so faintly they might have been imagined. A plucked rose of exquisite shape lay in his hand.

"A moss rose, my darling. Did you think I could ever forget?" he asked softly, smiling at her awe. "Wear one for me every day at your breast, until I can replace it with a jewel." And with trembling fingers, he pushed the stem into her button hole.

Tears of joy came to Lelia's eyes, and for a moment she clasped those big hands in hers, pressing them to her heart. Acutely aware of the danger they were to one

another, she parted from him and walked away to the stone bench. When she looked up he was gone, like a spirit.

Passionate wanton she might be by night, but by day Lelia was the prim Mrs. Lockwood, and it was in this guise that she intruded upon Jared's privacy in his study a day or two later. The matter of Lady Margaret had become an urgent one.

"How are you?" Rising at sight of her, his dark eyes burned.

She smiled intimately. "Well, thank you."

"Lelia!" he breathed with ardor.

Touching the desk which separated them, she rejoiced at his deep need of her, then came briskly alive. "I must talk to you about Lady Margaret." The name flung a wedge between them, as she knew it would. Like strangers they sat down, and just in time. A knock on the door rudely interrupted their private fantasies.

"Good morning, Mrs. Lockwood!" Adam Jeffrey, elegantly cool, stood in the doorway. Smiling at him, Lelia returned to her ledger.

"Do you mind if I take Margaret out to lunch, Jared?" he called out. "I thought we'd go up to Hunstanton."

"Excellent idea, Adam. That'll do her a world of good." Waiting until the door had shut, he continued, "He's one of the few people who's ever been able to tolerate Margaret. She really perks up when he's around."

Lelia kept her voice businesslike. "I wouldn't have bothered you about this, sir, except I think she's taking more laudanum, and I can't understand it." She flipped through the ledger. "The cigarettes were stopped; the dose is unchanged. Yet her erratic behavior suggests she's still receiving an additional supply." She sighed. "Again I ask, do you want me to try and dilute the drug?" Sitting with his chin in his hands, he looked puzzled. An answer not forthcoming, she persevered gently. "Did you never try and stop it?"

"Many times, Lelia, many times, but you must realize—and I will always blame myself for this—it was a long time before I realized she was hopelessly addicted. We were living apart and I was blind to the truth. Once I acknowledged her dependence, I made a number of attempts to break her of the habit, but the withdrawal was so painful, and her moods so violent that I soon gave up. Frankly, laudanum makes her happier and less difficult. With a doctor's help, we arrived at a dosage which agreed with her—one she could tolerate, which wasn't destructive. And I've let it alone . . ."

Snapping the book shut, Lelia said worriedly, "Well, I think she's getting more from an outside source, and it concerns me."

"Is she that difficult for you to manage?"

"No, not really," she lied, thinking of the seesaw moods, the vicious outbursts.

"Then let it be, sweetheart." Their eyes met and he added quietly. "It's time I told you about my marriage. Margaret's father was an earl, a card-playing crony of my father's. Like many others, one day he found himself greatly in debt, but instead of giving my father a promissory note for money, he gave one for a marriageable daughter. I saw her once or twice before we were married. God! I've asked myself a thousand times why I ever agreed to that rotten marriage—" Stretching his hand across the desk, he clasped Lelia's tightly. "I'd been called to the Bar—a vain, young man, who respected his father's judgment. After all, my grandfather was a farmer, and it was quite a coup for me to marry into the aristocracy. Her title opened some doors for me in London, and I had wealth; though I must say her dowry came in handy later. As for our marriage—" He smiled bitterly. "It's been a disaster from the start. We have wildly different temperaments. She needs someone genteel like Adam. I married a handsome, proud woman who detested the physical side of marriage, and wouldn't submit to conjugal duties. Fortunately, she became pregnant almost immediately with our first-born son. Banished from the marital bed, I re-

mained happily away until my infidelities so irritated her that I was recalled. Again, she quickly became pregnant. Our second boy was born and she developed a uterine tumor. After the operation, the doctor told me that another baby would kill her. So I absented myself from her bed, and we went our separate ways without regret. She, to laudanum, first given her in that illness; and I, to whichever woman caught my fancy—”

Pausing, he whispered tensely, “I want to kiss you, Lelia.”

Transfixed, she stared at his full, sensual mouth.

“It’s never happened before. I swear it, my darling. Not with any other woman. I love you,” he cried with sudden urgency.

Upset by his story, she stood up, trembling. “How can you say that? You know what I am.”

“My love.”

“A whore,” she lashed out. “A thief.”

Now, he was on his feet, pain in his eyes. “No, Lelia, don’t say that. The past has nothing to do with us. You walked into Richmond Hill and gave me back my life. You made me love. Isn’t that enough?”

A tear rolled down her cheek. Instantly, he wrapped her in a tight embrace, his mouth heavy and insistent. That passionate kiss caught her soul and when he raised his mouth from hers, Lelia clung to the perilous safety of his arms, asking in a frightened whisper, “What am I going to do?”

“Fall in love with me—” His voice was low.

With a jerk, she pulled away. “About Lady Margaret . . .”

For a moment he looked as miserable as she was feeling, lost and shaken. Then, running a hand through his thick, black hair, he returned to his desk. “Give her the full dose. It won’t do any harm. The doctor approves . . .”

Ignoring Jared’s advice, Lelia tried cutting down on Lady Margaret’s drug intake, but the results were so alarming that she stopped. Then she had to face an even more unpleasant fact. No change must be precipi-

tated. The woman was more valuable to her alive than dead. While she lived, Jared and Lelia—unless he found a new mistress—could continue as lovers. But if she died anything might happen. Lelia might be sent away.

So she spent her waking hours in a lethargic daze, exhausted by their violent lovemaking. Teasing her, Jared said that she had complained that she couldn't sleep without him; yet here she was blaming his presence for loss of sleep. Rarely did the nightmares trouble her now, but when they came they were very vicious.

Once, weeping in his arms, describing the agony and shame of those years, Lelia asked fearfully, "Do you mind?"

"You mean does it make a difference to us?"

She nodded dumbly.

"No, Lelia, it doesn't. You weren't making love. It was an act of coupling—no more."

A comforting answer. But what if he were free to marry? Would he ever marry such a woman?

"Do you know how I think of you?" He laughed with delight. "I see that radiant child's face I saw so many years ago at Richmond Hill. Do you remember? I've never seen such a look of adoration. What I want—" Gentle fingers caressed her face. "Is to awaken that look again. No woman has looked at me like that."

Now, she laughed. "I can't believe that."

"It's true, sweetheart. I've slept with as many women as you've bedded men, but never been in love."

"Well, don't feel lonely, Mr. Stoner," Lelia cautioned with an edge to her voice. "No man loves a whore, unless he be mad. What you need is a passionate virgin."

"I've found her," he said, deadly serious, kissing her very hard.

In day-to-day life, they were both circumspect, but at times their powerful emotions overruled prudence. A glance met could set them on fire. They ached for one another. The distance separating them was an agony. Lady Margaret, lost in her opium fog, knew nothing. But Kezia Stoner, with her ~~sharp~~ hawk's eye, was not

blind. When Lelia mentioned her concern to Jared, he agreed but said not to worry—his mother was completely under his domination.

Throughout the summer, they drifted in the intoxicated haven of each other's arms. September came and Adam Jeffrey was back when tragedy struck.

Jeffrey was in Norwich for the day on business. The family and Lelia were at luncheon, having dessert and coffee in the brilliant glare of the oriel window, when a telegram was brought in by Reeves, the butler. Taking it from the silver tray, Jared slit open the envelope and read it, then read it again, his face turning white. With an inarticulate cry of rage, he strode out of the room.

Snapping her fingers imperiously, Kezia signaled Lelia to bring her the message, which had fallen in front of her son's plate. Obeying, the companion waited for a reaction. Kezia flushed to the roots of her white hair, then went ashen like her son.

"Dead . . . he's dead," she muttered in a stunned voice.

At the far end of the table, Lady Margaret continued to smile aimlessly at some figment of her imagination.

No word of enlightenment came from Kezia Stoner. Boldly, Lelia picked up the wire and read that Adam Stoner, Jared's oldest son, had died of diphtheria. Softly, she questioned Mrs. Stoner, "Do you want me to tell Lady Margaret?"

She shook her head with vehemence. "We'll let Mr. Jeffrey do that," she hissed. Lelia took her ladyship upstairs and saw her settled for the afternoon, and this time—out of fear—gave her a larger dose of laudanum. Within a half-hour, Lady Margaret lay in a trance on the couch, swathed in comforters. Relegating her duties to Hooper, Lelia left the house for a breath of air and the peace of the walled garden.

Expecting to find it empty, she was dumbfounded to encounter Jared slumped on the stone bench, utterly bereft.

"Jared?" Eagerly, she ran to him.

Furious at the interruption, he glared at her. "Go

away," he cried. The brandy bottle in his hand reminded her that she hadn't seen him drink much at all lately.

Caressing his forehead, she asked, "Can't I stay with you?"

Pulling away from her touch, he swore vehemently, "God damn you! What the hell do you know about anything like this?"

At sight of her shocked face, he grabbed her, his voice breaking. "Oh, Lelia, I'm sorry. Forgive me, darling."

Tears ran down her cheeks as she cradled him in her arms. He wept like a child.

"God, Lelia, I'm cursed. Everything I love, I destroy. Richmond Hill is going, my son—"

"At least you have another child left, sweetheart."

"You don't understand—" Meeting her eyes, his face contorted with anguish. "I don't love that boy. It was the other, the other one . . ."

Not knowing how to comfort him and fearful lest Jeffrey or someone else intrude on their privacy, Lelia tried to disengage herself, but he tightened his hold, pleading with her not to go.

"I won't leave you, Jared." Touched, she bent down and kissed him, her lips warm on his cold mouth. As he caught her to him with a low cry, she suddenly realized with an aching heart that she was deeply in love with him.

Seizing her face in strong hands, he cried out passionately, "Promise me, Lelia, promise me that you'll never leave me."

Attempting to soothe him, she tried to hide the depths of her feelings. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I can't bear the thought of any other man ever touching you again." His eyes glittered dangerously. "And one day—so help me, darling—you'll tell me that you love me."

And then you'll leave me, Lelia thought in agony. He began to nuzzle her breasts like her poor dead boy, and she felt again those sensations stirring within her

when the baby wanted to nurse. Feeling her tension, he opened her blouse and began to relieve the fullness. And as she felt the strong pull of his mouth, she silently cried out her love to him. Long, long moments later, buttoning up the garment, he leaned against her, no longer drunk, and she clung to him rapt with love.

"May I sleep with you tonight?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Lelia whispered. "Now, I must go." And plucking a moss rose she placed it against her heart and smiled. . . .

Lelia Savage had gone into that garden a woman infatuate. She left it hopelessly and passionately in love, but it was not a despairing love. On the contrary, she welcomed it, knowing that such love comes but once—if at all. Still, she was hesitant to tell him because she didn't know love's strength and feared to endanger its fragile life. When she was sure of him, then she would speak.

Adam Jeffrey ran into her as she was turning into the main avenue from the path of holly trees.

"If you're looking for Mr. Stoner, he's in the walled garden." Lelia flashed him a brilliant smile.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lockwood. Is he all right?"

"Much better, I think." She walked on, her heart ecstatic. A momentary thought that she had been a fool to look so happy on such a grim occasion evaporated when an image of the candle darted into her mind. How plainly she saw it, but where had she used it? Jared carried a different holder . . . This one was somewhere else. A lantern hung in the wine cellar. Where had she gone afterward?

Wishing to avoid Lady Margaret as long as possible, Lelia strolled toward the front of the house. At any time of day it was beautiful, but it was particularly so at sunset. Already, burning light danced across the mullioned panes of glass and the oriel window, illuminating Richmond Hill like an enchanted palace with its pinnacles, chimneys, turrets, and towers . . . Tower.

"Oh, my God!" she said aloud, staring at it in horror.

Not wanting to alert Reeves by entering the front door, Lelia raced through a side gate into the Italian garden, and dashed up the steps to the French windows leading into Jared's study, which he never kept locked. Around the courtyard she tore past the Elizabethan staircase to the porter's room. Where was the damn key? Distraught and nearly out of her mind, she went through the key rings one by one, trying them all out, because she couldn't remember which was the right one. The great clock struck twice in the corridor before she found it. With a sob, she let herself into the long disused wing. Bolting the door, she searched frantically for the candle, and found it where she had left it.

As in some terrible nightmare, she yanked open the stout oak door and began the steep ascent, armed only with the candle. Up, up, up she went, twisting around those hellish stairs. What had she done on that awful day? Again, she felt a throbbing headache, but could remember nothing. Whimpering in distress, Lelia got down on her hands and knees, clutching the candlestick, and crawled up the stairs looking for a clue. Something was wrong with the stairs, that much she knew. Jared and the baby were now one in her mind—in her arms, at her breast—and the image gave her courage to save her love.

Three steps from the top, Lelia found what she was looking for. Under her groping hand the riser collapsed like a pack of cards, and she gazed down into the cavity with its murderous pivot. She tightened it as far as possible, her hands bleeding in the attempt. Then, carefully lowering the riser, she searched for its hidden mechanism. A faint catch assured her that the ghastly contraption had locked. Taking a deep breath, she placed a foot on it, then her full weight. Nothing happened. She then walked up the staircase, then down. The step was as sound and sturdy as the day on which she had first encountered it.

Jared Stoner was safe, and as Lelia sat in the dark

with only the wavering light for a companion, she whispered to her mother, "I've done enough. Let me go now. I love him too much to kill him. Leave me in peace . . ."

Lelia had one moment of fright, which nearly undid her. After replacing the key on its ring in the porter's room, she started across the vestibule for the grand staircase, and ran straight into Jared and Adam Jeffrey, who had just come downstairs.

Sick with guilt, with no business being in this part of the house or using these stairs, she flushed crimson. Jeffrey appeared puzzled, but the look of love and gratitude on her darling's face rendered her speechless. It was all she could do to keep from touching him.

Adam Jeffrey was the first to break the spell. "Stoner, let's get a drink. A brandy and soda would do us both good."

And Jared, tearing away his hungry eyes, left Lelia alone.

Later that night in her bedroom, just as he had so often held her in his arms and kept the night-terrors at bay, so did she now hold him, giving him the succor he so desperately craved. And when he awoke at dawn and left her bed, he took away her heart.

After a refreshing cup of tea, Lelia dressed and went to check on Lady Margaret. She lay prostrate in bed, and no amount of coaxing could persuade her to arise. The levels in the bedside decanter and the one in the sitting room were unchanged from the previous night, yet she was already in a stupor.

"M'lady." Lelia shook her gently. "Where did you get the dose from?"

The blank eyes were sly. Then, in the next moment, sweeping the bed, they filled with terror.

Her piercing screams rent the air. "Oh, God! Snakes on the bed! God, get them off. Get them off!"

Helping her out of bed, Lelia walked her leaden body into the next room and sat her down on the couch.

"I'm going to get your comforters, and you'll spen

the day here. There is nothing wrong with your bed. There are no snakes," she told her firmly. "You've taken too much laudanum. I want to help you, m'lady. Where are you getting it from? Tell me and these dreadful hallucinations will stop."

Lady Margaret cocked her head, a crafty expression on her porcelain features. "Why don't you ask my husband?"

At Lelia's shocked look, she giggled, then sank into a drugged sleep. Summoning Hooper, Lelia left her in charge and went downstairs for breakfast. Adam Jeffrey was there. He informed her that the casket was due shortly, together with the younger boy, who had passed through the epidemic unscathed. Finishing his breakfast, Jeffrey went to visit Kezia Stoner, secluded in her suite.

Uncertain what to do, Lelia paced up and down the corridor trying to unravel the problem of Lady Margaret. Clearly, someone was giving her additional supplies. Jared couldn't be burdened with this worry now, but soon it must be faced. Such a critical situation could no longer be ignored. And suppose he was the one giving her landanum? Doing it to keep her quiet . . . to protect an illicit affair. Lady Margaret had really gone downhill since her own arrival, Lelia thought.

No, she thought uneasily, she would never believe that of Jared. Certainly, he was capable of cruelty, but not such consistent vicious behavior. And he blamed himself for Lady Margaret's addiction. A woman in love will believe anything, Lelia thought, sighing, aching to see him again. And she headed toward his study. The door stood open. He sat at his desk, head in his hands. Impulsively, she went in and touched his face. Catching her hand, he kissed it fervently.

"Stay close to me, my love—"

A sound in the corridor parted them. All that distance away the massive front door could be heard on its hinges. Throwing her an agonized look, Jared strode out of the room. Lelia followed at a discreet distance.

Two of the servants carried the coffin down the windowed corridor to the drawing room, and positioned it on a long table. Almost unnoticed in the room's shadows stood a young boy about fourteen years old. He was definitely Lady Margaret's son, with her cameo features. No wonder Jared disliked him.

Jared closeted himself with the dead boy. The survivor drifted up to see his grandmother. Adam Jeffrey told Lelia that the funeral was scheduled for the next morning. A few relatives, and some of the villagers, presented themselves that afternoon. Recalling that great party held years ago, Lelia wondered what had happened to all those friends who had come to greet a young man on a day of joy. Didn't they remember him in his hour of sorrow? Jared, she realized, was as friendless as herself. Except for Adam Jeffrey—who was magnificent. He sat with Lady Margaret, spent a long time with Kezia Stoner, cheered up the boy, who was frightened of his father, and even had time to spare for Mrs. Lockwood.

Noticing Lelia's strained face as she stood in the corridor before dinner, he approached her. "Are you all right, Lelia?" Never before had he used her Christian name and she started.

Inclining his head, he said softly, "Stoner has told me that you, too, have lost a child. Don't let this tragic episode grieve you."

Her eyes swam with tears. "Thank you."

"Would you like to pay your respects?"

Lelia nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and he took her arm as they went in. One look at her darling's face wrung her heart. He sat by the bier rigid with grief. A glance into the coffin and she drew back in shock, meeting Jared's eyes. The boy had been so like him that she had thought for one horrible moment that she was gazing at her dead love. Someone helped her out of the room.

Outside, Adam Jeffrey peered anxiously into her stricken face. "I think we should have some dinner, Lelia."

"And the others?"

"Won't be down tonight."

Lelia looked back toward the drawing room.

"He wants to be left alone," Jeffrey said. "I'll take him something later."

Sensing that she was nervous and tense, he ordered his chair placed next to hers. The distant relatives wandered in, ignoring them. With great tact, Adam Jeffrey encouraged Lelia to eat and to talk about herself. Very gently, he questioned her about her dead child.

"A little boy . . . four years old . . ." she murmured. "He drowned."

"Oh, my dear!" he cried, then said comfortingly, "A woman as lovely as you will marry again. There'll be other babies."

The wine glass in her hand shook. Blood-red drops fell onto the damask table cloth. Lelia faced him, her voice flat. "Yes, of course." Then she smiled. "Since we're exchanging confidences, tell me about yourself."

"Not much is exciting," he replied. "I live mainly in Devon tending my estate, or in London where I have a house." His grin was apologetic. "I don't work and I'm burdened with too much money. Which leads to a sedentary life if one isn't careful."

"And marriage?" she asked, feeling recklessly bold.

"Well, Daphne would have been an awful mistake, don't you agree? They nodded like two conspirators. "Charming creature . . . and for Jared's sake I would have liked being his brother-in-law. No, Daphne was wrong—for me. Years ago, I loved someone, but nothing came of it."

"What happened?"

"She wanted money and a title."

"I think she made a mistake." And with a light laugh, Lelia rose. "I must check on Lady Margaret."

"Let me come with you." He slipped his arm through hers. She found herself confiding in him, telling him her worries about her patient, but outside the drawing room

Jared's presence hit her so strongly that Lelia stopped in dismay, her voice sounding high and unnatural to her ear: "Excuse me, Mr. Jeffrey, but I must consult Mr. Stoner about his wife." Mercifully, he had the tact to let her go in alone, shutting the doors behind her.

Jared, she knew, wanted this moment as much as she did. With a quick step, he left the dead boy, his arms outstretched, and they flew to one another's anguished embrace.

"You'll be at the service?"

She nestled against his breast. "Won't it look bad?"

"No, I want somebody there I love. I don't want to be alone." Hungrily, he sought her mouth. "I'm staying here all night, darling," he murmured. "Will you be all right?"

Lelia nodded.

He stroked her face lovingly. "Try and sleep."

It took all her courage to leave him. Again in the corridor, with no thought for Adam Jeffrey, she leaned weakly against the door and let the tears fall.

"You're exhausted, Lelia," he said.

"So stupid . . . sorry . . . to be such a fool," she whispered, wiping her cheeks, "but death always shocks me. I keep thinking of my son."

"Will you do me a favor?" he asked gravely, waiting until he had her full attention. "I meant what I said earlier. If ever you need a friend, Lelia, please call on me. I'd like to help you. You seem so alone."

Does he suspect us? Lelia wondered. That Jared and I are lovers? Searching his grey eyes, she saw only a sincere offer of friendship.

"You're very kind, Mr. Jeffrey," she faltered.

He looked amused. "You can start by calling me Adam, if you will."

"Adam," she replied, properly shy, and they set off to see Lady Margaret. Hooper met them at the door looking peaked and weary.

"How is she?"

"About the same, Mrs. Lockwood."

Jared's wife lay in a deep sleep, her face as pale as

the enveloping bedsheets. Turning to Adam, Lelia said, "She's been like this the last two days. Much worse than usual. She wakes, demands another dose, then sleeps. Do you think I should call the doctor?"

"If she's like this tomorrow—yes," Adam exclaimed, checking her pupils. "It's nothing new, Lelia. I've seen her this way many times. Stoner's tried everything, but it's useless . . . What a hellish life he's led." Fixing her with a long look, he gave a wry laugh. "Poor devil—on top of all his other problems—can't even find a loving woman."

"Regrettable," Lelia answered coolly.

His handsome face reddened slightly. "I don't think there's anything more to be done tonight. Why don't you get some sleep?"

Tucking in the bedclothes, Lelia called out to Hooper. "Can you get someone to sit up with her ladyship tonight?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lockwood."

"Good, do so. And get some rest yourself."

Outside Lady Margaret's suite, Lelia bade good night to Adam Jeffrey. Then, in a state of utter exhaustion, she retired to her room. But without Jared, she felt destitute and could not sleep. Dawn found her at the window watching the landscape change from an early morning grey to the vivid colors of September. Leaves were beginning to turn in the park, and the air was crisp and pungent. She finally sat down, picked up a book, and read one sentence endlessly. Such attention ought to have engraved it on her mind, but she couldn't remember a word. Finally, it was time to dress. Bridget popped in with hot water and tea, and Lelia drew herself together for the day's ordeal.

Lady Margaret's condition remained unchanged. Time enough to call the doctor after the funeral, Lelia decided. Adam met her drifting aimlessly in the corridor, and persuaded her to have something to eat, for which she turned out to be very grateful. It was the last good meal she was to have in days.

After breakfast the relatives gathered in the morning

room to await the carriages that would transport them to the church. Jared came out of the drawing room, followed by the coffin. He looked terrible, unshaven and gaunt. The lovers' eyes met briefly, then Lelia lowered her veil and watched him walk out of Richmond Hill with his first-born. Kezia came behind, leaning on her young grandson for support. The eagle's face looked crushed and defeated. Ill at ease, the kinsmen straggled after, trailed by the staff. Lelia found herself in a carriage with Adam. Neither of them spoke as they rolled down the avenue to the front gates. As the flint church appeared, he squeezed her hand in a comforting gesture; then he took her arm and led her up the path between the yew hedges. Inside, managing to evade him, she joined a group of servants clustering at the rear. Adam went to a front pew to join Kezia Stoner.

Sitting in this small, ancient church with its rich carving and screen, Lelia reflected upon whether such beauty was intended to distract the grieving mind and heart. Again, she saw her child's small coffin and felt the menace of the police behind her. She prayed for her two loves. . . .

Later, as Jared walked up the aisle, she saw him glance around the church. Looking for her? Lelia hoped, wondering if this tragedy would mar their happiness. Outside, in the churchyard, she studied tombstone inscriptions to calm herself. Not once did it occur to her that her revenge was succeeding. That Jared Stoner's heart was being slowly broken.

Riding back together, Adam dropped a confidence which almost crushed her. "I've asked Mr. Stoner to come to London with me for a few weeks. Don't you think it's a good idea?"

Her reply was mechanical. "Just what he needs—"

Adam looked pleased. "Yes, that's what I thought."

At Richmond Hill, Lelia tried to flee upstairs while everyone filed into the drawing room for a reviving drink, but Jared, approaching, addressed her casually, "Might I have a word with you, Mrs. Lockwood?"

She nodded and they proceeded to his study. Locking the door, he took her in his arms.

"Forgive me, love, for going to London. I didn't know what to say to him."

Lelia trembled against him and he pressed her to his heart. "Do you think he suspects us?" she asked.

"No," he replied slowly. "But it's best to be very cautious."

"What shall I do about Lady Margaret?"

"God, darling, do what you think is best. Call the doctor. Do what he says. This has happened time and again. He may stop the laudanum. Then it's going to be very rough. She needs around-the-clock care, and no one must be left alone with her." At her startled look, he said grimly, "She may become violent. You must be very, very careful." Caressing her hair, he asked softly, "Do you think you can manage?"

"Of course." She tried to sound brisk and efficient.

"And can you sleep?"

Their eyes met and her mouth trembled. "No."

"I'll be back as soon as possible, and then *I* will keep you from your rest," he said huskily.

She cupped his hands over her breasts. Bending down, he kissed her long and hard, as if he would suck the very life from her lips. Then she heard him whisper, "Never forget one thing, Lelia Savage. That I love you with all my heart and nothing will ever change that fact."

Minutes flew by while they stood bewitched, clasping one another. But they had tarried too long and this was a dangerous game. Her love released her and they went their separate ways. . . .

12.



JARED STONER was to be away from Norfolk for two weeks. Had Lelia known that from the beginning, she couldn't have borne so long an absence. She found herself totally changed and vulnerable. No longer an embittered woman, her grief over David had muted and her rage and horror at Lady Hunt's persecution had dissipated. Lelia now desired very little. It was enough if Jared smiled at her, kissed, or slept with her. Day after day, she lived without a thought for the future, because they were creating a new world. A world as fragile and beautiful as a moss rose. She clung to Jared's pillow every night in an agony of love and loneliness, and looked after his wife by day.

Dr. Perrin came from King's Lynn to examine Lady Margaret. Packing up his instruments, he said to the companion, "It's a bad business. She'll have to be taken off the drug."

"It's easy enough to stop the prescription," Lelia commented, "it's the additional supply which alarms me. We stopped the cigarettes, and now we're searching the suite. A few bottles have turned up. Personally, I think she's built a stockpile over the years, but her rages make everyone give in rather than fight her."

"I know. I know," he replied. "Such a waste of a life . . . but it must be stopped." He looked Lelia over with a critical eye. "You seem a capable young woman. Do you think you can handle it?"

"Oh, no trouble at all," said Lelia, smugly confident.

If her mother had been trying with her alcohol addiction, Lady Margaret with opium was infinitely worse. When she wasn't shrieking at some terror born in her own mind, she screamed at Lelia, trying to learn her weaknesses.

The first day was relatively calm. Dr. Perrin had left, and Lady Margaret awoke and stretched lazily, demanding her medicine in a silky voice. Disbelief greeted the refusal.

"Just who do you think you are to cross me?"

"I'm following orders."

"Whose?" Sparks of rage flew from her grey eyes.

"Dr. Perrin and your husband's, m'lady."

"Jared?" Her tone became shrill. "He doesn't care if I live or die. Where is the bastard?"

Prim and straight, Lelia folded her hands. "Mr. Stoner is in London with Mr. Jeffrey."

"Oh, is he now?" she sneered. "Leaving you with me?"

"I was hired to be your companion."

"Then companion me. Get me a bottle."

Standing her ground, Lelia refused.

Lady Margaret tried flattery. "You're a pretty woman, Lelia, but you wear the most awful frocks. Even mourning needn't be that atrocious." She grimaced. "Help me, and I'll help you. Look through my wardrobe. Anything you want, you can have, only—" An unpleasant edge crept into her voice. "Give me what I want."

"No."

Lady Margaret rewarded Lelia with a look of malevolent hatred.

This scene was repeated daily. Lady Margaret's arrogance was followed by flattery; then wheedling, coaxing and bribery, topped by vicious cruelties. Verbally, Lelia found her more abusive than most men. Only Jared's memory made it endurable, and the fact that the woman really suffered. Coiling snakes were on the bed, in the bed—they were everywhere. Grinning, obscene faces leered, frightening her with their gibber-

ish. Abysses yawned down which she fell screaming. And a multitude of withdrawal symptoms made her wretched: stomach cramps, loss of appetite, breathing difficulties, restlessness, and severe chills.

It was hard to dislike someone who was so miserable, and for her sake, Lelia begged Dr. Perrin to reconsider his decision, suggesting that her agonies were so grim as to make sudden abstinence impossible. Politely, she was told to mind her own business. He was in charge, and if she disagreed he would send for a nurse. Subdued, Lelia went back to keeping watch over her frenzied patient, always aided by a second person—usually Hooper or one of the other servants. Because Lelia slept so poorly, she stayed on duty nearly twenty hours a day. Meanwhile the search continued, and a second small cache of bottles was uncovered, convincing her that they were gradually coming to the end of their quest.

Lady Margaret often turned on her companion. "Look at you," she mocked, "so unattractive in that dumpy gown. Like an old maid, Mrs. Lockwood. You can't catch my husband's roving eye looking like that. He likes them with plenty of shape—or is there something to you under that rag?"

Lelia remained mute.

"Does he fancy you? Does he?" She glared, biting her lips. "Oh, yes, he must or he wouldn't have put you in the room."

"The room?" Lelia faltered.

"Yes, the room, you little bitch. The room he puts all his mistresses in so that he can get to them easily from his bedroom."

The younger woman's face had gone white.

Lady Margaret threw her a mocking glance, her eyes ferocious. "It's an elegant room for a servant, don't you think—or haven't you had time to notice? My, my! Does he keep you that busy? All the Stoner doxies end up there. He's just aping his father. Every pretty servant takes her tour of duty. Has he told you he

loves you? Usually when he says that it means he's getting tired of the amour—"

Unable to stand any more, Lelia walked over to the dressing table and began searching through the drawers, though they had been examined before.

"What are you doing?" Lady Margaret cried in fury.

"This is the last bottle," Lelia replied coldly, pulling it from its niche behind a drawer. "And it's going now."

For the first time Lady Margaret looked terribly frightened. "I think you're trying to kill me."

"What?"

"So that you can marry him! That's what you're doing, you're going to kill me."

"No, Lady Margaret," Lelia replied in a shaking voice, "this is what's going to kill you if you keep taking it, and I'm here to stop you—"

She was up and out of bed faster than Lelia had ever seen a human being move. In a furious rage, Lady Margaret seized a vase and broke it over Lelia's head. Dazed by the blow and half blinded by her own blood, the younger woman lunged at Lady Margaret as she grabbed the laudanum bottle and lifted it to her mouth. Lelia knocked the thing out of her grasp. Flying through the air, it crashed to the oak floor, the liquid dissolving into the wood.

With a bloodcurdling shriek, Lady Margaret closed in on Lelia, aiming wild blows at her skull with a large marble paperweight. Fortunately, Hooper was in the next room and burst through the door. Lady Margaret was distracted for a moment. Lelia aimed a hard blow to the chin and knocked her unconscious. Then the two women carried her back to bed.

Gaping at her fearfully as if she were a wild animal, Hooper asked nervously, "Shouldn't we tie her down, Mrs. Lockwood?"

Lelia remembered the horrors in St. James's Square and her stomach turned over. "No, she'll only get worse if we restrain her." She laughed wearily. "What's the matter, Hooper, do I look that awful?"

"Yes, ma'am, you do. You'd better put a compress on that head and lie down for a bit. I'll take over."

"Well, have someone join you," Lelia instructed. She left the suite dispiritedly. It was impossible to predict those lightning moods, and the fault was hers—she had baited the poor woman. Flaunting her power over her. Holding up the bottle . . .

The cut, although it still bled copiously, was only superficial, and a cold compress soon put her to rights. Lelia lay down on the large bed, both her head and heart aching. So Lady Margaret knew about her and Jared. Or had she just been trying to upset her? To Lelia's utter chagrin, she found that she was wildly jealous of Jared's previous mistresses.

A pot of tea restored her senses. Later in the evening she went back to visit her patient and found her awake and touchingly contrite. The wound was a mere scratch, Lelia assured Lady Margaret, holding her hand until she fell asleep. Then the companion began her nightly prow. Over a dozen bottles had been located, but she felt uneasy. More might be hidden.

With the doctor's encouragement, Lelia dismissed Lady Margaret's modiste the next day as the most likely person to be introducing opium into the house. She trusted Hooper absolutely. She, too, wanted to see her mistress broken of her vicious habit. From Kezia Stoner, Lelia could get no assistance whatsoever. Her malice was twofold: dislike of her daughter-in-law, and resentment of the companion. Any one of the servants could have been slipping laudanum to her ladyship, but Lelia felt that things were now well under control. She could only hope that everything had been found. . . .

So many, many days without you, my beloved—an eternity, Lelia thought, heartsick. Soon it would be October. One afternoon, watching her ladyship in peaceful sleep, she spoke to Hooper: "Why don't you take a break? Have dinner and a nap, and tell Bridget not to come. She'll sleep through. I don't anticipate any serious problems." She had forgotten Jared's grim warning.

More and more trees were turning. The front avenue was a riot of color. Enraptured, Lelia stared out at the lovely sweep of lawn below. How he must hate to miss this, she thought, feeling suddenly old and tired and desperately alone. A sound behind made her swing about. Lady Margaret was watching her from a nest of satin pillows, a smile on her thin face.

"You look exhausted, Lelia." Her well-modulated voice was gentle with concern. "Why not rest for a while on that chaise?" At Lelia's doubtful look, she smiled. "You don't always have to stand at attention."

"Sorry," Lelia laughed, relaxing. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better. I'm surprised. It has been hell, hasn't it?" At her companion's nod, they both smiled. "Now, why don't you go and sit over there, child. Put your head back against those pillows. I'm not going to disappear. You've taken everything away. Found all my little hiding places . . ."

Numbed by the velvet utterance, Lelia sat down on the chaise, pressing a hand to her throbbing temple.

"Do you love him?"

Startled but fully alert, Lelia answered in an even tone. "Love whom, m'lady? My husband?"

"I never could," her ladyship whispered, a forlorn figure in the ornate bed. As Lelia attempted to rise, she held up a hand. "No, my dear. Unhappiness can't be shared . . . Why not lie back on those soft pillows and rest?"

"No," Lelia replied.

"Well, I don't want you fluttering about me, so you just sit over there, while I rest here. All right, pet?"

God help her—she was exhausted. Too many sleepless nights, with only catnaps during the day, had taken their toll. Lelia closed her eyes briefly and within five minutes had fallen into a deep sleep.

When she awoke the light had altered, turning familiar objects into phantoms. Shocked to have been so remiss, Lelia staggered to her feet, her neck stiff and head pounding. It took a moment to focus on the

bed's disorder and the crumpled figure twisted in the sheets.

Lady Margaret was dead, staring up at the ceiling with glassy eyes. An empty bottle lay on the carpet by the bed. Dear God, where had she found it? And even more important—how full had it been? In great terror, for she knew that this meant a police summons, Lelia pulled on the bellrope. If the bottle had been half full, it might be construed as an accident. But if it had been full she might have deliberately overdosed herself. And why? There would be inquiries.

A knock sounded on the suite door. Lelia gave brisk orders: fetch Dr. Perrin, and send Reeves and Hooper up immediately. Alone, she paced the room in a stupor. How could she be so derelict in her duty? Every servant sitting with Lady Margaret had been forbidden to rest—on Lelia's orders. And if the police learned her true identity . . . Abject fear—the kind that she hadn't known since David's death—gripped her. And what would Jared think? He, who had trusted her with his wife?

Dr. Perrin arrived and spent a long time examining the body, while Lelia sat in the sitting room wracked with despair. Telegrams were sent to London notifying Jared Stoner and Lady Margaret's family. The police appeared—first one officer, then two, then more. The staff looked at her with hostile, suspicious eyes. Her only friend was miles away. Too far to help her now. . . .

"I must do a post-mortem," Dr. Perrin told her. "As for you, I'm afraid you'll have to see the police."

"The police?" She blinked at him dully.

"Yes, Mrs. Lockwood. As the last person to see her alive, I'm sure you can give us an accurate picture of her state of mind."

Lelia twisted her wedding ring nervously. "Of course," she replied. "I still don't know where she found it. Both rooms have been searched from top to bottom."

"Well, she got it someplace. We don't know how

much at the moment. Hopefully, the autopsy will tell us. The husband is coming—”

“Tomorrow,” Lelia cried softly, wondering how she could exist through the long night.

She and Dr. Perrin had a quiet dinner together, while the police began their preliminary investigation. Noticing her extreme pallor, he remarked, “Maybe I can put them off until the morning.” But it was hopeless. They required immediate answers.

Lelia was summoned to the dead woman’s suite to tell her story. The first time was not the hardest. They appeared to believe her. It was only during the retelling, as she went over, and over, and over it again, that it began to sound preposterous. Skepticism greeted her alarmed replies. She began to forget her name, and what was a lie and what was the truth. And then, dear God, she began to ask herself if Jared would believe her. . . .

They kept her at it. Questions, questions. At intervals, she was allowed to rest or given a cup of tepid tea, but mostly it was a nightmare of probing. By midmorning, Lelia was near tears, slumped and wretched in a straight-backed chair. Footsteps penetrated her fatigue. Looking up, she saw Jared Stoner enter the sitting room, Adam Jeffrey behind him. Her love’s dark eyes rested on her, his face grim.

“How did it happen?” he demanded quietly.

“Mrs. Lockwood was with your wife when she died,” the constable explained. “Perhaps, you’d better tell him, ma’am.”

Watching Jared, Lelia waited for a sign, some clue as to what he was really feeling, but he remained impassive. Adam looked stunned.

“She told me to rest on the chaise longue,” Lelia said in a weary monotone, “because I was exhausted. I’d never taken such a liberty before, but she assured me it would be all right. A few minutes . . . that’s all I thought it would be.” Her voice shook. “But I fell asleep. No one was with me because I’d dismissed the maid, thinking I could control her.” Her hands began

to tremble and she clamped them together. Dear Lord, it was like talking to a stranger. "I overslept by several hours, I'm afraid." Adam winced. "The minute I saw her I knew she was dead—"

"How did you know that, ma'am?" an officer asked.

She gave him a sideways glance, her voice rising. "I've seen death before." Again, she faced her lover. "She found another bottle, and we thought we had found them all . . ."

"Ah, I see now," Jared Stoner mused, snapping to life. "Well, she's always hidden a supply either in the suite or around the house. I've had a number of similar sessions with my wife over the years. Unfortunately, she was prone to this type of sly, secretive behavior during a withdrawal. There have been near fatalities before." His dark eyes swept the police contingent. "My butler tells me you've been interrogating Mrs. Lockwood all night?"

"Yes, sir, that's right."

"Surely you don't hold anything against her?"

There was a pause while Lelia shifted nervously in her uncomfortable chair, and the officers met for a brief consultation.

"Not at the moment," said the head man.

"Good. Then I take it you've finished with her?"

A mumbled assent gave him his answer, and Jared nodded vaguely in her direction. "Be so good as to retire, Mrs. Lockwood. And take the rest of the day off."

She stood up, legs trembling, eyes downcast. "Thank you, sir."

Back in her room, Lelia broke down and wept in relief that the ordeal was momentarily over, and in torment that Jared might think her a liar. Unpinning her hair, she bathed her aching face, and removed the odious black garments and confining corset. Wrapping herself in a comforter, she sank onto the bed, wanting him so much she thought she'd go mad. How many other women had lain here, she wondered in panic,

their bodies feverish with desire. Desperate for his kiss.

Tossing aside her drenched pillow, she flung a hand over her forehead. Sleep wouldn't come with this headache. A new thought chilled her. How could she live on in this house with Lady Margaret dead? Wouldn't he now send her away?

Bottles. She began counting bottles of laudanum as she drifted off into a disturbed sleep. Someone lay down beside her and she felt a gentle pressure on her temple. Opening her eyes, Lelia saw his face—Jared's. They kissed fervently, so intent on their own delight that all else was forgotten.

"Oh, Lelia, my love . . ." He was breathing heavily, one hand stroking her hair. "I want to make love to you right now . . . but I think it best to wait for the night." Nuzzling her cheek, he softly asked, "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"Now that you're back." Shame and heartache tore into her smile. "I'm sorry, Jared. You trusted me, and I failed you—"

"No, never . . ." he murmured.

"Do you believe what I said?"

His face was grave. "Of course, darling."

"And the police?"

"They know you had nothing to do with it. They're just being their usual officious selves."

Tears stung her eyes. "I don't know where she found that bottle."

"Sweetheart," he said with gentle firmness. "Richmond Hill is a honeycomb of secret passages. In times of persecution all kinds of things were hidden—people, treasured objects. Margaret had a priests' hole in her bedroom by the fireplace. If I hadn't been so upset about my son, I would have remembered to tell you. Possibly, the bottle was stored there—it's empty now, I looked."

"But why would she wait so long?"

"Perhaps she didn't expect a drastic withdrawal. Perhaps someone brought it to her from the outside."

He shrugged. "We'll never know, I'm afraid, but she was adept at concealment. Now, you mustn't blame yourself for this, darling."

"She suspected us." Her voice was low.

"Oh?" He looked guarded.

"She said all the Stoner doxies ended up in this room . . ." A knife twisted in her heart.

"Lelia, I've never pretended to be a saint with you." Taking her face in his hands, he studied her with brooding eyes. "You've always known there were others. My God, my marriage ended almost at its birth. Of course I've had other mistresses, but there's a difference—" Drawing her close, he kissed her. "I'm in love with you." His expression darkened. "Do you know what it was like being without you in London? A terrible loneliness . . . I felt as if I'd lost my soul. Adam drove me wild with his incessant kindness; all I wanted was to race back to you . . . Ah, now I see it!" He smiled in triumph. "That lovely, radiant expression I've waited for . . . so many years."

A tear ran down her cheek and he kissed it. "How can you keep me on?" she asked tremulously.

"I've been thinking about that." A stern eyebrow was raised. "How would you like to be my secretary?"

"Jared!" Attempting to sit up, she was promptly pulled down to the security of his arms.

"Yes, there's a lot of business with Richmond Hill—accounts, correspondence. And you can catalogue my library."

Blushing, she leaned on his chest. "What will people say?"

"I'm sure Margaret's death will be judged a natural one, and I need a secretary. If anyone chooses to gossip, let them. It can't hurt us. We're already outcasts, my love. But we'll be discreet—" His mouth tensed. "Except for this once. Lelia, I want you too much. I can't wait for dark night," He gazed at her, transfixed. He began to undress her slowly, savoring his restraint.

Without a thought for his dead wife, she welcomed

his passionate advances with equal passion. And when he finally left, she fell asleep, her hand reaching out for the pillow where his head had rested.

Lelia dined by herself, then slept again. Jared came to her later in the night, and they made love shamelessly, their ecstasy with one another reaching new peaks. In his arms, she slept the first tranquil sleep she had known in days.

She awoke the next morning desolated, feeling like a character in a fairy tale who had forfeited her life for an enchanted kiss. One rapturous embrace, and she had surrendered her destiny to a man who might, at any moment, betray her. What was love to him if she brought ruin to his good name? Might not his lips grow cold if his wife was found a suicide and Lelia Savage held culpable? So did she torture herself, damning her insane pride which never allowed her to confess her love. Perhaps this was a judgment on her for loving too much a man she had sworn to kill. . . .

All that long day, they remained together—Jared, Adam, and Lelia—awaiting the results of the post-mortem examination. Jared Stoner showed not even a hint of dismay over Lady Margaret's death. Indeed, he seemed far less moved than Adam Jeffrey, the best of friends, who never left them.

Now, Jared's concern was for Lelia and her welfare, which was not unusual under the circumstances. As a penniless employee in his household, in great trouble, she deserved some consideration. Neither of the lovers had to spell out their major worry: that the police investigation might uncover the secret of her past.

Jared's son arrived home from Eton—a ghostly reminder of his mother. His white, pinched, angry face haunted Lelia. On his return from taking the boy up to his grandmother, Jared, noticing her distress, strode over. With a slight pressure on Lelia's shoulder, he bent down, whispering, "Don't be afraid. I love you." Their eyes locked in mutual joy. Then, smiling encouragement, he walked away. Preoccupied with a glass of

sherry, deep in thought, Adam Jeffrey appeared oblivious to this snatched moment.

Those comforting words and brief touch sustained Lelia the rest of that agonizing day and into the early evening. Dinner was followed by coffee in Jared's study. While the two men sipped their brandy, she pretended to read a book, her ear alert for any unusual sound. At last the doctors were announced. Dr. Perrin had brought a colleague, who had assisted him at the post-mortem examination.

Positioning himself on the oriental rug, Dr. Perrin folded his arms and enlightened them as to his findings.

"Using the bottle you gave me as a guide, sir—" He nodded at Jared. "As far as we could ascertain, the stomach contents held almost a full bottle of laudanum. Nothing will be proved conclusively until all the organs are analyzed."

A full bottle . . . a full bottle, Lelia's mind echoed dully. Suicide.

"Now, that indicates to me—and to my friend, Peters—suicide rather than an accidental overdose."

She felt the color drain from her face. Adam looked at her in alarm, as if he expected her to faint.

Exchanging a look with his colleague, Dr. Perrin continued affably, "Would you know any reason, Mr. Stoner, why your wife would want to take her own life?"

From Jared's set expression, Lelia knew that he had been dreading this verdict as much as she, but he handled the situation beautifully. His face, although pale, was composed, and his voice well controlled.

"Yes, I can think of one very strong reason."

Lelia's body went rigid. He flicked a warning glance in her direction.

"She was despondent over the death of our oldest son. That was barely two weeks ago. She fell into a decline, and I don't think ever recovered."

"Any other reason?"

Jared arched an eyebrow, derision in his voice. "I'm sure you gentlemen have heard talk about our unhappy marriage, but that was no reason for her to kill herself.

God knows we've been miserable since the day we were married. But that would never drive her to desperation. Long ago we took up separate lives. My wife chose to embrace opium. I've made a number of attempts, as Mrs. Lockwood was doing—" His heavy lidded eyes sought hers. "To break her of this damnable habit, but success came only when she wanted to quit. Several times she stopped, but her temperament was such that the drug gave her relief from an irritable disposition. So she always went back to it."

Dr. Perrin looked thoughtful. "What do you think happened on this occasion?"

"I believe she deliberately deceived Mrs. Lockwood into thinking she was giving up the drug." Jared paused, studying his hands. "Either she had a cache, or someone brought it in from the outside. Despondent about her son, she took an overdose. This is not the first occurrence," he said emphatically. "She simply overreached herself this time." Leaning on his desk, he gave Lelia an intent look. "Am I not right, Mrs. Lockwood, in saying that my wife was grieving for her son?"

The lie came easily. "Yes," Lelia replied in a low voice. "She was distraught." Never once had she heard her mention her son in all her ravings. . . .

Drs. Perrin and Peters huddled together, then turned back to the master of Richmond Hill. "We see no reason to inflict further pain on you or your family, Mr. Stoner. Murder can be ruled out—no sign of violence either on the body or in the room. Briefly, we think your wife's state of mind points to an accidental overdose or suicide."

Jared's face was tense. "Will there be an inquest?"

"Not if the police concur with our findings," smiled Dr. Perrin dryly. "However, if they believe that Mrs. Lockwood acted in a criminally negligent manner, that's another problem."

"Mrs. Lockwood is a trusted member of my household," Jared said harshly. "She tried to break my wife of her addiction on my orders. Dear God!" He threw up

his hands. "If anyone is to be held criminally responsible for Margaret's death—I'm the one. I went to London."

Behind him, Adam laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"I'm sure that we and the authorities will be in agreement, Mr. Stoner," said Dr. Perrin smoothly. "You'll be hearing from the police later tonight regarding their decision."

It was over. Jared escorted them to the front door. Adam remained behind with Lelia, offering a few words of comfort.

"There's no need for you to wait up, my dear. It'll go well. Why not get some rest? You look drained."

On the edge of tears, she stared at him, unable to mutter a coherent word.

"The funeral's tomorrow morning at eleven," Jared announced in a brisk tone. "I think it best, Mrs. Lockwood, if you came—to still gossip."

"Yes, sir," she replied, rising unsteadily to her feet. A hand reached out to support her—Adam's. Across the room, Lelia saw Jared shoot him such a look of jealousy that it startled her. So it was true that he couldn't bear another man touching her. Despite her worries, she smiled faintly, delighted that she could so arouse him.

But alone in her room, elation gave way to oppression. Disturbed at having told such a lie, she found small comfort in the fact that Lady Margaret had never once wept over her child. And what was the alternative in this mystery? A too drastic withdrawal, and a system which couldn't tolerate such a large dose after abstinence? Perhaps. Sitting in the wing chair far into the night, Lelia mulled over her death, until Jared interrupted her troubled rumination.

Bursting in from the secret passage, he looked in a perfect fury. "Damn you!" His eyes flashed. "Adam seems uncommonly possessive."

Again, her lips trembled in a smile. "It was an instinctive gesture of friendship—no more."

He stood over her scowling. "I told you once, Lelia, and I meant it—the idea of any man touching you is hateful to me. I'll not have it!" Pulling her to her feet, he shook her hard. "You are mine, do you understand? Mine. Damn it, if it were humanly possible, I'd put my brand on you! Now do you understand how I feel?"

She laid her head against his broad chest. "And if the day comes when you no longer want me . . . ?"

"It would be like stopping my breath," he murmured fiercely, embracing her. For a long moment they clung together, lost in the room's shadows.

"What about the inquest?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"There won't be one." His lips brushed her forehead. "The police agree with the doctors' verdict."

"Thank God!"

"I can't stay, darling. I've got to get back to Adam. That's one of the reasons I want him to go, Lelia. We can't have any privacy."

"Did you tell him I was going to be your secretary?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, an eyebrow shot up." He looked down at her tenderly. "I fear he worries about you, Lelia. Staying with such a reprobate. But he took it well." His mouth hardened. "Do you know, I think he's smitten by you? Damn him!"

"Darling!" She touched his face. "He's your oldest friend."

An ominous note rose in his voice. "Well, he's not getting any ideas about you. He's going as soon as possible—"

"Be careful, my love," she warned him.

"If he goes, I can walk in the daylight with you, and we can be free. If he stays, we live in shadow. Now, which shall it be?"

"I want you," she cried miserably.

"Good. It's settled," and his lips caught hers in a deep kiss.

13.



THEY were well into October. Adam Jeffrey had gone back to his Devon estate, Margaret's son had returned to Eton, and Jared and Lelia had settled into a routine like any married couple. By night, he came to her with the urgency of a young bridegroom, staying longer and longer each morning, ignoring the stable bell's warning at six. On his departure, she roused herself with tea, dressed, and after a quick breakfast, headed for the study to attack his correspondence and ledgers. She devoted most afternoons to cataloguing the library, a job she particularly enjoyed. Frequently, Jared appeared, either just to watch her work or to pitch in. They wasted much time in idle caresses, in holding hands, and in reading passages from favorite books. On those days when he worked in the fields, Lelia brought him lunch of bread, cheese, and wine. Then, overriding her protests, he made her join him and they sat under a tree, with the glorious Norfolk sky enveloping them in shimmering light, and ate a meal fit for a king.

In the beginning, they were circumspect, formal in speech and conduct. But it couldn't last. Not even the ecstasy in the bedroom was enough: Jared wanted to possess her—body, heart, and soul—so that their two shadows, as he said, would become one. Little by little they gave in to their passion as they fell even more deeply in love. Avoided glances were met and fiery longing acknowledged; doors slammed shut and moments embraced. At dinner, if his mother absented her—

self, Lelia's place was moved next to his so that their hands could easily meet.

Learning that she could drive a chaise, Jared arranged for her to go on an errand once a week to a neighboring town or village. By an odd coincidence he always turned up on horseback to meet her. They were safe from malicious tongues, he reassured her. The gentry ignored him because of his poverty, and few others knew him.

And so they wandered like the lovers they were in those beautiful Norfolk towns. Hand in hand, they strolled along the quays and streets of King's Lynn, where ribbons that Jared bought for her hair in the Tuesday market touched her more than any jewels could have. Often, they walked along the sandy stretch in Hunstanton, sheltered by high cliffs; or meandered through the peaceful byways of Old Hunstanton, lined with creeper-covered cottages and lovely trees. Sometimes, in a daring mood, they remained late on the beach for the sunset, watching the sky catch fire or turn translucent. And he would take her in his arms, sheltering her against the chilly winds, and murmur that he would smell the North Sea in her hair that night.

Studying Jared, as might a stranger, Lelia was fascinated to see that the harsh lines had left his face—that he seemed deeply content with his life. Gone was the brandy bottle, and he drank no more than a glass or two of wine at dinner. About his business affairs, he was reticent. Her only clue—if things had gone badly after a jaunt to Norwich or Lynn—was a brooding manner and the grim line of his mouth. But an hour or so spent with her, and he was a changed man.

They knew six incredibly happy months—months of such joy and peace as to erase all the ugliness and sorrow from Lelia's life. Only two things marred her happiness. She wanted to marry him, and she wanted desperately to bear his child. One early December night, entering her room, he found her weeping grievous tears. Instinctively, he knew what was wrong.

Kneeling beside her, he laid his head on her abdomen. "Lelia, darling, we have so much," he cried softly.

But the heartache could not be so easily appeased. "I was told a miracle might happen," she sobbed in anguish.

"And it may, darling. Nothing would give me greater joy than for you to have my child, Lelia." His loving hands stroked her. "I'm sure you will. But in the meantime, we have this wonderful love which so few people know. Just think of that, and don't dwell on any sadness." And carrying her off to bed, he held her against his heart throughout the long winter night.

Always, they had to be on the lookout for danger. A week or so later, Lelia overheard mother and son discussing the Christmas holiday.

"Adam is coming?" queried Mrs. Stoner.

"As usual." Jared sighed irritably.

"And I suppose *she* must join us?"

"Yes, of course. My valued secretary—"

"Don't fence with me, Jared," she hissed. "Everyone in the house knows what she is, and Margaret barely dead three months. Have you no shame? Your mistress!"

"Mrs. Lockwood is not my mistress," he replied, deadly calm.

"You be careful, my son, lest it be thought that she poisoned Margaret to marry you."

"Who says it?" he angrily demanded. "If any accuse her, let them do so to my face. Both the doctors and the police found her innocent. So help me God, mother, if you mention this again, I'll not speak to you—" He strode out of the drawing room in a cold fury, and ran into Lelia standing immobilized in the corridor. Dragging her off to his study, he locked the door and wrapped her in his arms.

"Don't worry, she'll hold her tongue."

"But the others?" she asked fearfully.

"Nothing to fear. I don't look on you as my mistress, Lelia," he said. "You are my heart's darling—the love of my life."

And once again his feverish kiss and embrace put Lelia off her guard.

Christmas, usually a season of intense unhappiness for her, brought Lelia much joy that year. A thick, powdery snow began falling several days before the holiday. Trees, hedges, vines, and sleeping flowers were dusted with white glitter, and the ground underfoot made a delicious crunching noise. Only the tracks of deer, birds, and squirrels invaded the terrain. And standing proudly as it had for centuries, was Richmond Hill, sunlight reflecting from a thousand panes of glass.

On such a glorious day did Adam reappear, with piles of luggage and presents, to be restored to Jared's good graces. While they welcomed him on the front sweep of drive, a flock of wild geese flew high overhead, their cries eerie in the muffled atmosphere.

Jared's son came home from school and unbent enough to help Lelia gather evergreen branches—pine, holly, and mistletoe—for the house. Later, he joined his father and Adam on their quest to find a Christmas tree. And what a tree it was! Its thick, sturdy branches covered with pine cones, it stood at least fourteen feet high. Setting it up in the drawing room took quite a long time amid much laughter and many trips to the punch bowl, while Kezia Stoner and Lelia sorted out boxes of ornaments. On went the candles, followed by small pieces of fruit and nuts. Finally came the delicate colored balls—as enchanting as the ones Lelia had loved as a child. At last it was ready. Jared lit the candles and everyone applauded. Laughing in delight, Adam gave Kezia a kiss and whirled her about the room. Jared's dark eyes enfolded Lelia from a distance, and she was at peace.

So late was Jared in coming that night, that Lelia crept miserably into the big bed, huddling forlornly in the chilly sheets. But a sudden warmth beside her and loving words in her ear restored her flagging spirits.

"Merry Christmas, my lovely darling," laughed Jared

happily. "I'm sorry to be so late, sweetheart, but Adam and I got to reminiscing about Cambridge—"

"I'm so pleased you're friends again . . ."

"Yes, it's good." A shy note entered his voice. "I have something for you, Lelia. I wish I could give it to you tomorrow, but it's best now—" He held out a small package wrapped in gold foil.

Too large for a ring, Lelia though meanly, hating herself. With trembling fingers, she untied the red ribbon, tore off the paper and stared at the jeweler's box.

"Well, open it!" he cried with a little boy's impatience.

A ruby heart winked up at her from the satin—a beautifully cut small stone, blood red, hung from an exquisite gold chain.

Tears filled her eyes.

"Do you like it, my love?"

"Jared! Oh, my dear, it must have cost a fortune!"

He grinned at her stupefaction. "When I saw it at Garrard's, I knew it was meant for you, and for no other woman."

She couldn't hide her curiosity. "When did you get it?"

"After Margaret's death . . ." Opening the clasp, he said, "Let me put it on you." And as it lay against the folds of her nightdress, her lover unbuttoned the gown. The lovely jewel nestled between her breasts. "My heart against your heart, Lelia. Always wear it, so you may carry me with you forever." Bending down, he burned that ruby heart into her skin with greedy, hungry kisses.

As he claimed his reward, Lelia offered up a silent prayer. Marry me, Jared. Marry me, please, my darling. Dear God, I want to be your wife . . .

Christmas Day went well. Lelia's little gifts were nicely received: for Kezia Stoner, a sketch of her young grandson; for the boy, a silhouette of his father; for Adam—who constantly complained of losing change—a coin purse; and for her darling, a sketch book of watercolor and ink views of Richmond Hill. So touched

and surprised was he that it left him momentarily speechless. Then, loudly clearing his throat, he gravely thanked her—wondering how she'd found the time? Perhaps these were the reasons for her falling behind on the accounts!

A burst of laughter greeted this sally. They all had a round of punch and thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the day, and those days following. Adam, in wonderful spirits, cheered everyone with his gaiety and jests, and he and Jared were inseparable—any tension between them gone.

On New Year's Eve, Lelia took a morning break after working hard for several hours. Skipping out of Jared's study, she flung on her cape and ran across the terrace to the steps leading down to the Italian gardens. All the graveled walks and knot gardens were hidden by snow, and she stepped gingerly onto a path, her boots making the first impression.

"May I join you?" Adam's voice rang out by the gate. She laughed. "Of course. Jump over."

Side by side, they paced, each intent on their footprints. The air was cold, but exhilarating.

"I've never seen you with your hair down before," he said in surprise.

That was at Jared's request, she thought, blushing. "Sometimes I wear it like a young girl just for fun." She giggled nervously.

Disturbed by his continuing silence, she gave him a surreptitious glance. He was studying her carefully, his grey eyes reflective. Inwardly, Lelia cringed. A bad, bad mistake. No widow would stoop to such vanity—that was a harlot's trick.

He spoke softly, with a hint of passion. "Such a lovely woman shouldn't stay buried here—" He gestured disdainfully at the barren landscape. "You ought to marry again."

"Governesses and companions have small chance of that," she replied, her mouth curving in scorn. "We're not exactly prizes on the marriage market."

"Why not look for other work?"

"I'm not qualified, Mr. Jeffrey." Her tone was icy. "I was brought up a lady. Besides, you must know there's a surplus of women in this country since so many of our young men have emigrated."

He drew closer. "But you're exceptionally beautiful."

Folding her hands, Lelia's face tightened in reproach. "I loved my husband, Mr. Jeffrey. I don't expect to find that again."

"Oh, yes. Of course not." He looked stricken. "Forgive me, Lelia—I've behaved abominally."

She granted him the smallest of smiles. "No, you were only showing concern. I appreciate your thought."

"Lelia! Damn it, will you get in here!" Standing in his shirtsleeves, Jared Stoner glared at them from the terrace.

"Those account books," Lelia said airily to Adam and flew up the stairs.

That was the end of good fellowship between Adam and Jared. Lelia was banished to the library to catalogue, while the men rode off to King's Lynn for lunch. All that day they were together: Jared, tense and unhappy; Adam, affable and tactful. By dinner time Jared was drinking heavily. Kezia retired with a migraine; her grandson was too young to know what was going on; and Lelia had no business knowing anything. She sat there stunned, trying to digest one of the worst meals of her life, while Adam feigned a lighthearted manner, and Jared, glum and brooding, downed glass after glass of wine. As soon as possible, she made her excuses and fled to her room.

That night, for the first time in months, she slept alone. Next morning at breakfast, to her utter astonishment, she learned from Reeves that Adam Jeffrey had left Richmond Hill and returned to Devon. A pressing business matter had called him home. And her master was in his suite—not to be disturbed until the morrow, which meant a rendezvous with half a dozen bottles of brandy.

The next day, when he finally reappeared in the library, Jared held Lelia a long time before speaking.

"Promise me one thing, Lelia," he said huskily. "That you'll always stay with me—no matter what happens."

"You great silly!" she cried. "How could I ever leave you?" Smiling, so happy at seeing him again, she missed the note of anguish in his voice.

Gradually, the black fit of depression went. He became again his passionate, loving self and so possessive that he couldn't bear having her out of his sight for more than a few minutes. Teasing him once about this closeness, Lelia received a strange reply.

"Whenever you walk out of a room, I have the uneasy feeling that you've stepped out of my life."

"No more than a spirit in your dreams, eh?" she gently mocked.

But his face was grim, his eyes unsmiling.

These troubled moments didn't last long, however, and were, she thought, linked to his financial problems. As one who lived not for the future, but day to day, Lelia accepted the many small joys heaped on her, trying not to dwell on the question ever present in her mind.

Would he ask her to marry him? Yet how could he take for a wife a woman who was not only penniless, but a prostitute as well? Pregnancy had caught a husband for many a woman, but even this trick was denied Lelia. Christine Marshall's words haunted her: "Should make you a very valuable mistress." Barren. Was this her hold over Jared?

One day in late February, Jared suddenly seized her hand, exclaiming, "I'm going to show you Richmond Hill."

Bewildered, Lelia stared at him. "But I know it."

"No, you've only seen a third of it. I want you to see the closed sections, Lelia, so that you'll appreciate my legacy." Without more ado, he hurried her past the servants' staircase into an area which was foreign to her.

"These were the last rooms to be shut—" he said brusquely.

He flung back a pair of stout oak doors with a loud

crash. Dazzled by the brilliant light streaming through a richly ornamented oriel window, it took Lelia a moment to get her bearings. It was the Great Hall—a giant of a room, almost as large as the courtyard it faced. The ceiling was two stories high. A thick layer of dust and cobwebs lay over the dark oak paneling and the timber-patterned minstrels' gallery. Large chunks of plaster had fallen out of the embossed ceiling and frieze, and the elaborate stone screen was chipped and cracked.

"Come, come, darling, we mustn't tarry. On to the dining room . . ." And he swept her off into a suite of rooms, which could be used as one chamber, or split up into individual ones by closing partitions. Here the walls were painted a delicate pale green, and gilt-framed French landscapes were set into the plaster. But it was as if an evil fairy had slipped into the room and shredded with long fingernails an offending beauty. The paint was flaking, plaster fruit lay in sad heaps on the floor, and the paintings were dim with neglect. What furniture remained was threadbare. All the carpets were ripped up and the floorboards gouged. The curtains were disintegrating.

Lelia was speechless. It was as if a dearly loved friend had confessed to a mortal illness. Up the staircase they hastened to the east wing, of which she was the only occupant. A score of bedrooms—some with the wainscoting intact; others painted—but everywhere the stench of decay. On an Elizabethan bed, a startled rat scurried out of a ruined pillow and darted into a hole in the paneling. In another room, a great heap of plaster had crushed the bed.

Frightened by Jared's violent mood, and wondering what he expected of her, Lelia tried to stop the nightmare tour.

"Please—no more! It's too sad," she pleaded, as they passed her room and entered another disused corridor—the south wing.

"Damn it, I want you to see it!" he swore passionately. "Then maybe you'll understand me better." And with a brutal shove, he pushed her into the Long Gal-

lery, once the greatest room in the house, occupying the whole of the south wing. It took away her breath and broke her heart. Stained glass enriched the oriel windows at either end. The paneling here was oak and carved walnut, in a dangerous state of decay. The parquetry floor and the plaster ceiling were in a similar condition. Everything movable had been stripped from the room and the damp odor was sickening. Through broken panes of glass, disfiguring the great bank of windows, a chill wind howled. Pools of water lay on the floor from a recent deluge.

"For God's sake, can't we go?" Lelia begged.

There was a wild and dangerous light in Jared's eyes. "No, darling, you'll see everything and know what I live with."

Down a spiral staircase they went, toward that section she was dreading. Now, she learned that the immense chamber fronting the house had once been the saloon. In and out of every room he dragged her—except to the tower. Finally, she could bear it no longer. Leaning against a wooden mantle, sick and faint, Lelia burst into tears.

"Why are you weeping?"

"Oh, God, it's terrible—such awful devastation." Why didn't he hold her? Did he suspect anything? she wondered in terror.

"Why are you so moved about an old house?" he asked cruelly.

"Because you love it so," she cried in a passion. "What happened to it, Jared? I remember it as beautiful."

"And so it was, Lelia, so it was," he sighed heavily. "Now it's reduced to the state it was in when my grandfather bought it. As a poor boy, living nearby, he used to climb the walls and sneak through the park to get a glimpse of it. Richmond Hill was to him the loveliest house in England, and he dreamed foolish dreams of owning it. He was lucky. He became a rich farmer, who went to King's Lynn and increased his fortune many times over. When Richmond Hill's noble owner went

bankrupt—thanks to betting excesses—grandfather snapped up the estate for a trifle, then devoted years and a great deal of money to reclaiming the land and restoring the house.”

Strolling over to a bay window, Jared gazed out across the great swath of lawn toward Ingoldisthorpe. “When my father inherited Richmond Hill, it was magnificent: thirty-five hundred acres of arable land, and a mansion stocked with the most costly furniture and art available. Those were the days of the great balls and house parties; the big shoots with fifteen hundred pheasants bagged; and elaborate dinners fit for the gentry who never came, not that my father cared. With more than one hundred servants and a bottomless pit of money, he and my mother could do just about anything. They had a big house in Mayfair, and did nothing except have fun and spend my grandfather’s hard-earned money.” With his back to the light, his face was in shadow. “Worldly goods were lavished on me: the finest schools, European vacations, entrée into a fine profession, a noble bride—” He paused. “How old were you when we met in London?”

“Just seventeen,” she whispered.

“So young,” he said sadly. “That’s when the hell began.” His voice was grim. “As the heir to a large estate, I was everywhere allowed to run up the most enormous bills—my right as a young gentleman of fortune. The dream ended when my father died and I found myself virtually penniless.” In great strides, he began pacing the saloon. “Father and I weren’t close. Our contact over the years was slight, and I was ignorant about his financial affairs. However, disquieting stories had reached me about his gambling. Frankly, I thought it malicious gossip and discredited them. Your father’s ruin—”

Lelia started and he grasped her shoulders. “Yes, sweetheart, I know all about that. God only knows what my father did with those eighty thousand pounds!” Kissing her white face, he spoke gently, “I want you to know something, darling. I take the blame on myself.

My father not only destroyed your father, but ruined your chance for happiness—" Holding her tightly, his voice broke. "I'll always take care of you, Lelia." She leaned dizzily against his shoulder.

"Other men were ruined," he continued in a flat tone, "but there was no proof against my father. No one saw him cheat, but a suicide and several bankruptcies didn't help. Friends cut him dead in the street. He was asked to resign from his clubs. No one would play cards with him any more, and when that source of income dried up, he turned to Richmond Hill. Parcels of land were sold; the plantations were hacked down and not replanted. After the agricultural disasters in the seventies, the drought made this place into a wasteland. Then began the awful piecemeal destruction of the house. He sold paintings, bric-a-brac, tapestries, furniture—anything of value. When it became too noticeable he simply closed off a room. All this I learned after his death, walking through the house, studying his accounts . . ."

"Poor Margaret!" He gave a dreary laugh. "Her dowry paid off my debts, and the sale of our London townhouse took care of some of my father's most pressing bills. We moved back here, and in one terrible day I learned that the rent rolls had been abolished, and that Richmond Hill wasn't making a shilling. But that wasn't the worst. As my father's revenues were slashed, he fell into heavy speculating. A long list of bad investments, further draining Richmond Hill, brought us to the edge of ruin—"

In despair, she interrupted: "But your mother blames you. Why not tell her the truth?"

He smiled down at her. "She loved him, darling. They had a good marriage, as marriages go, and I'm not going to break her heart now. She's old, Lelia, and won't last much longer. The boy's death shattered her."

"Now, you know why I work in the fields, why we live as outcasts, why the staff is so small. For years, I've been carrying out the work begun so ably by my father—selling my inheritance, closing off rooms, whole wings . . ." He faltered.

"Jared, ask Adam to help you."

His face went livid. "No, I can't."

"But he wants to help. He told me."

"Oh, he would have been a godsend had he married Daphne, and I would have accepted his help. It would have been an excellent investment for my brother-in-law. As my friend, it would be charity, and I will never take that from anyone!"

Lelia's heart stood still. In one terrible, agonizing moment, she suddenly realized the enormity of her scheme. In cheating Jared out of a fortune, she had wrecked all her own hopes as well. Had Adam and Daphne married, her darling might have considered her for a wife. She had condemned herself to limbo. Grief-stricken, she walked away. As she did so, the floor tilted and she fainted.

Regaining consciousness, she saw his haggard face bending over hers. "Darling, are you all right? Are you ill? It's not like you to faint."

He had found a chair and was cradling her in his arms. Weakly, she nestled against his shoulder. "I'm just tired . . . It's so very sad to see—" she breathed, looking around the room.

Tenderly, he kissed her mouth. "I've been very rough with you today, Lelia, but I wanted you to know everything. Until you came, I loved only Richmond Hill." His look was black.

"And now—"

"You both possess me," he said, avoiding her eyes. A hand cupped her breast. "Tell me you love me," he whispered.

A gentle kiss was replaced by a burning one which took her breath away.

"Say it. Say it!" he cried urgently.

Still, she denied him. Was it her shock over Richmond Hill? Was it the knowledge that her father's money had been poured away like water? Taking his hand, she pressed it to her heart, but her voice was cold.

"If you love me, you will know how I feel about you and not demand more until I can give it."

A flush of red crept across his cheek, as if she'd struck him. "Damn you, Lelia! That's not enough!"

"You've taken everything from me already—my parents, my child, and, by God, you're not taking my heart until I'm ready to give it to you!" Raging at the lie, she burst into a storm of weeping.

His answer was to carry her upstairs to her room, tenderly undress her, put her to bed, and hold her until she fell asleep. The next morning when Lelia saw him in his study, he said simply, "I love you," and she knew that she was forgiven.

In the last week of March, Lelia sat working at a captain's desk in Jared's study, when Reeves brought in the morning post. Flipping through the letters, Jared extracted two with a look of alarm. He slit the envelopes and read through them quickly, then, with maddening deliberation, reread both documents.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing's the matter," he snapped. "Now leave me alone."

She glanced down at the small pile on her desk. "You wanted these out this afternoon."

"They can wait," he replied irritably. "Go catalogue."

Never before had he dismissed her in so brusque a fashion. Incapable of working, Lelia sat at the library table, chilled. By luncheon her nerves were at such a pitch, she could scarcely eat. Neither could Jared, although he consumed a full bottle of wine. Finally, he flung down his napkin, stood and announced, "I'm off to London."

Lelia's heart sank and she kept her eyes on her plate.

Kezia Stoner's voice sounded petulant. "When, my son?"

"This afternoon."

From a great distance, Lelia heard herself whisper, "When will you be back, Mr. Stoner?"

"A week, two weeks . . ." Abruptly, he turned on his heel and strode out of the room.

His mother threw her a long, hostile look. "You'll never come before Richmond Hill, Mrs. Lockwood."

And with a sneer and a rustle of petticoats she was gone, leaving Lelia to her misery.

Still, she was vain enough to think—as lovers do—that Jared wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, and she went expectantly to her room. Numbed and fearful, she sat for over three hours before admitting her error. Then she steeled herself to enter his study, where she locked the door and began a cool, methodical search of all his papers.

Of course, she knew what was wrong—though he had made a valiant attempt to keep it from her, and had succeeded until this day. Jared Stoner was hopelessly in debt. Handling his correspondence and petty household accounts, Lelia had known there were difficulties—the Norwich banks were refusing him credit—but she had never before appreciated the gravity of the problem. The two letters had vanished; undoubtedly, he'd taken them. All evening she sat there, appalled, thumbing through Tobias Stoner's old records—the account books Jared alone had handled—and reading of his shocking extravagances and terrible losses. Even her father's payment was noted with a marginal comment: "So much for Savage!" And when Lelia knew the complete story, she wept for her dear love.

He was gone two weeks. She worked as hard as the poorest clerk in the City, afraid to stop lest her thoughts betray her anguish. Astonishingly, she had a new concern. All signs indicated that she was pregnant, which she just couldn't believe. How could she be so blessed? She, who was born under an evil star. No, it was nerves caused by her lover's absence. And her great fatigue, which made her nap in the daytime, was due to lack of sleep. Her nausea was due to a queasy stomach. Day after day, she labored far into the night trying to blot out Jared's beautiful face, only to etch it more sharply into her mind.

Mercifully, Adam Jeffrey burst into her unhappy world. After paying his respects to Kezia Stoner, he cornered her in the library and caught her sleeping among piles of books.

"Lelia!" Gently, he shook her awake.

Lifting her head up from the desk, she stared at him in confusion.

"What are you trying to do? Set a record? Kezia says you're at it day and night." Anxiety filled his handsome face.

Sitting up, she rubbed her forehead, and passed it off lightly. "I have insomnia, Adam, so I nap here sometimes and work late at night. Just a change of hours—" She gave him a wry smile.

"Where's the master?"

"In London." Picking up a library card, she began shredding it to pieces, speaking rapidly. "He's lost everything, Adam."

"So I gathered from talking with Kezia. And he's recouping in London?"

Lelia nodded.

"Damn. Damnation!" he muttered. "I've offered to help him. Many times. Even after Daphne's elopement, but he won't accept a thing."

"He's very proud."

"Where's he staying? At Albany?" Her bewilderment made him pause. "Didn't tell you, eh? Well, that's where he usually stays, unless he's in a black humor . . ." He patted her shoulder. "I'll try and see him there. When he returns you'll know what happened. If he hasn't spoken to me, drop me a note at my club and I'll come up immediately, as if on a casual visit. Perhaps I can knock some sense into him." He stared off into space.

"I always told him you were a good friend." And she tucked his card into her reticule.

"Pity he's so stubborn. Once his mind is set on something, it's very difficult to change it . . ." He sighed. "Oh, well, maybe he'll listen to reason. Jared's not the type to embrace poverty." Abruptly, the somber mood lifted. "How about going for a walk with me? You're looking very peaked, Lelia."

"Too much work," she muttered faintly. "Sorry, I must stay . . ."

He flashed her a worried look. "Take care of yourself, my dear." And, with a charming smile, he departed, leaving her alone to her gloomy labors.

One April morning Lelia awoke to a dull grey day. God, she thought, will this depressing weather never end! Rain and blustery winds ripped buds off trees and uprooted tiny flowers, defeating spring's promise. Even Richmond Hill turned ugly, dark, and damp on such a forlorn day. A pot of tea somewhat improving her spirits, she dressed and headed downstairs to the library, first checking the study to make certain all was well, as was her custom. Opening the door, she froze on the threshold. Jared Stoner was slumped at his desk.

The soft rustle of her dress alerted him. Raising his head, he looked up as if at an apparition. His face was marred by anger and fatigue; bitter lines about his mouth. He was unshaven, red-eyed, unkempt in shirt sleeves with his hair tousled. And at his elbow stood a brandy bottle and snifter. For a long moment they stared at one another, incredulous.

"My God!" she cried, finding her voice and coming forward. "What's happened to you?"

Pain and dull fury warred in his face. "Have you had breakfast?"

Numbly, she shook her head.

"Well, eat and come back. I want to talk to you."

Like an automaton, Lelia obeyed his orders, forcing down a piece of dry toast and a cup of scalding tea. Reappearing in his study, she found him standing by the bay window, examining the view.

"Close the door."

As she did so, he threw her a distant look. "Please be seated."

"No, thank you. I prefer to stand." And she took a firm stance in front of the Napoleon desk.

Again, his eyes swept the Italian garden. Finally, he spoke. "I've made a decision. I'm going to be married."

"Oh?" She watched objects blur on his desk. "When?"

"When my year's mourning is over—in about six months. She's someone I've known a long time. Wealthy—"

"Wealthy enough to save Richmond Hill?"

"Oh yes, rich. Very rich."

"Well, I congratulate you, Jared. You've found the ideal solution, haven't you? You won't take Adam's charity, but you grab it from a woman!"

Her malice roused him. "Damn it! It's acceptable from one's wife; not from a friend. Was there any other solution?"

"Not if you see it like that." Her eyes glittered. "Excuse me, sir, there's no need for me to stay any longer." And she turned to go.

In two strides, he came from the window to his desk, shaking with rage and another emotion. Fear. "Now, just a moment, Lelia," he said hoarsely. "This changes nothing between us. We'll go on as before."

"Am I to be your secretary or your wife's companion?"

"God damn it! What do I have to do, Lelia? Tear out my heart? Don't you know how much I love you?"

"I'm not sharing you with anyone else," she cried. "I won't have you coming to me, reeking of another woman's body."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play the innocent, Jared. She's bringing you wealth, and in return, you'll be expected to give her sons. If she won't demand it, her family will. You'll have to honor the connubial bed. Isn't that so? Isn't it?" She began to sob hysterically.

Reaching across the desk, he pleaded with her. "Darling! Darling, don't torment yourself so. Don't, my love!"

"You've said that you can't bear the idea of my being intimate with another man. Well, the thought of another woman's sleeping with you . . . bearing your children, sickens me." A strange emotion she hadn't felt in months rose in her. Hatred. "Sleep well, Jared. I'm leaving you." And she walked to the door.

Beside her in an instant, he towered over her, his face taut with anger. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Back to London."

"Back to London?" He looked stunned. "You wouldn't dare!"

"You don't own me. I'm not your chattel. I dare and I'm going."

"To the streets?" he sneered.

Lelia paused. "If it's the only way I can survive, I will."

He shook her roughly, in a frenzy, hurting her. "I'll not let you out of here." His voice was low, passionate. "You are mine, Lelia Savage, and nothing—no one—is ever going to separate us. And so help me, if you ever lie with another man, I'll curse you. I'll curse you until the day you die!"

They stood glaring at one another. Then, pinning her in his arms, he tried to kiss her, but fighting him madly, she wrenched herself away.

"Save your affection for your bride!" And she fled from his shocked face. Up the back stairs she ran, tears streaming down her cheeks. In the beautiful harlot's room, Lelia began cramming her meager wardrobe into her trunk, vainly trying to make plans. An alarming thought interrupted her wild endeavor: she hadn't collected her wages. Best forget them. She couldn't risk another encounter with Stoner. Better to leave Richmond Hill penniless, than beg from that bastard. . . .

Snapping the trunk lid shut, she took down her bonnet and ulster and started to don them, but collapsed with a fainting attack. Her few minutes rest in the wing chair lasted more than an hour. A knock on the door broke into her dreamless sleep. Standing before her stood Jared Stoner.

He spoke very gently. "Do you know what I've been doing downstairs?"

Lelia shook her head, dazed.

"I wrote two letters, Lelia. One to my solicitor and

the second to my fiancée, breaking off our engagement—”

Like a sleepwalker, she muttered, “I can’t live on your terms.”

Tenderly persistent, he cut through her apathy. “I’m not asking you to any more, darling. That was monstrously cruel. Since you’ve lived with me for months as my wife, I ought to have known that I couldn’t turn you back into a prostitute—a life forced on you by my father’s cheating.” His face was ashen. “Lelia, I love you. The child with the golden hair and radiant smile captivated me, but the turning point was seeing you that night with Lord Hunt. You’ve haunted my dreams . . . my existence for years. And when you walked into my house—”

“I came to kill you.” She wept.

“I knew you hated me,” he softly replied. “I sensed the other.”

“And you forgive me?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “If I turned you away now it would be like destroying my soul.” Opening his arms, he whispered huskily, “Come here where you belong.”

Lelia came and they clung together with desperate need, both terribly frightened by the evil thing which had so nearly separated them. “I can’t bear life without you,” he muttered. “Even if I were dead, I don’t think I could ever leave you. Now, listen to what we’re going to do.”

Dreamily, she closed her eyes, relishing his low, resonant voice, the strong pressure of his hands on her body.

“Sitting in the study, I realized I would only be marrying a second Margaret. Years of hell stretching before me . . . You are my rightful bride, and shall walk with me through all eternity—”

“Not until death do us part?” she asked, smiling at his fancy.

His dark eyes were serious. “No, I won’t leave you alone.” He tightened his embrace. “We share the same

heart . . .” His lips bruised hers. “Oh, my sweet love, will you marry me?”

An intense joy touched her soul. “Yes, Jared . . .”

Delight lit up his face. “I’d marry you today in London, but we must wait out the full mourning period to stop any gossip. Unless there’s a need for a secret wedding—” He looked at her expectantly.

Still uncertain and not wanting to trap him, Lelia shook her head. “What about Richmond Hill?” she asked tremulously.

“I have a few ploys left—small parcels of land I can auction—perhaps I can sell the library you’ve been working on. If I fail, I’ll sell the whole place.”

“But you love it so,” she said in deep concern. “The day might come when you’d hate me.”

“I love you more than Richmond Hill, Lelia. You’re worth any heartache.” He shrugged. “If necessary, we’ll sell and move to London, and I’ll go back to the Law.”

“Adam will help you.”

Thinking for a moment, he took a long breath, then said, “Well, I just might take him up on that.” Suddenly, he buried his face in her throat and kissed her, his lips becoming more and more insistent. Then kneeling, he began to kiss and stroke her breasts through the fabric. At her low moans of pleasure, the blouse was unbuttoned and the chemise untied, exposing her to her lover’s touch.

“You’re coming with me—where you belong,” he muttered thickly, his eyes dark with passion.

“Where?” She was trembling.

“To my bedroom, darling. I’m going to make love to you in my bed by daylight,” he announced, exultant, rising to his feet. “Take this ring,” he whispered. “Wear it until I can give you a proper engagement ring.” He thrust his signet ring onto the third finger of her left hand, using the false wedding ring as a guard.

Lighting the nightlamp, he led her by the hand to the fireplace. With a flick of his wrist, out swung the panel. As Lelia drew back in awe at the gaping darkness, he said, “It’s just a short distance, darling.”

I must warn him about something, she thought, as she stumbled along in the dark, guided by the flickering light, clinging to his warm hand. But what it was she couldn't remember. Besides, he was safe now . . . safe.

Jared's room overlooked the front park—a breathtaking view. It was a magnificent, large room with elaborately carved wainscoting and plastered ceiling; dominated by a great stone fireplace, huge banks of windows, and a gigantic canopied oak bed, roomy enough for four people and at least three centuries old. Standing before him, clutching her open blouse together, she felt suddenly shy.

With a gentle smile, he took the pins out of her hair and began running his hands through the thick curls as they cascaded down her back. "You look like a bride," he cried ardently.

Embracing him, Lelia held him tightly. "Oh, my darling, I love you so much."

Never had she seen him so happy. "How long I've waited to hear those words, Lelia!"

"I've never said them to any other man, Jared." Tears stood in her eyes.

Folding her in his arms, he kissed her long and deeply. "And you never will, my darling, not to any other man—ever." He undressed her, passionately tender, cherishing the moment as if it were the first time. "Only to me . . ."

They made love in the great four-poster bed, coming together with such rapture that Lelia thought she would die. And then her darling rocked her to sleep, and she remembered nothing more until she awoke.



A DAMP chill roused Lelia. She found herself in an unfamiliar room, lying alone and naked in a vast dark bed. Flinging out her hand, she saw Jared's ring. But where was he? He should not have left her—on this day of all days. She lay in those soft sheets, luxuriating in the memory of his loving for five, ten, fifteen minutes—then it was a half-hour. Not a sign of him. How long had she been asleep? As if in answer, the ebony bracket clock chimed four strokes. She'd slept for some time. Perhaps as long as three hours.

Slipping from his bed, she dressed, pinning up her hair in front of the convex mirror. Back she went to the bed like one bewitched; touching the sheets with gentle fingers, still feeling his heavy weight, his ardent touch . . . Then with a sigh, she briskly remade the bed, smoothing it out carefully so that no one would suspect the consummation which had taken place.

Relighting her lamp, Lelia tried to return through the secret passage, but no amount of fumbling investigation disclosed the panel's lever. There was nothing for it but to brazen her way out his front door. With bated breath, she did so, meeting no one, and quickly slipped down the corridor to her room. There she completed a hasty toilette, unpacked, and put away her clothes. Unaccountably, she was in a fine state of nerves, and incapable of idling away time in her room. Hurrying down the back stairs, she looked in his study—empty. Nor was he in the library, the drawing room, or any other room in that area. Perhaps he was in the

fields. Not bothering to grab a cloak, Lelia tore along the corridor, yanked open the front door, and began running down the drive. A blast of frigid air spun her nearly around and she placed her back to it. She was facing Richmond Hill . . . and its towers.

Her heart stopped. Dear God, it wasn't possible! Why did it still frighten her so?

She walked slowly in case someone was observing her. Back into Richmond Hill and the porter's room to locate that blasted key, which, oddly enough, she found today without difficulty. Opening the saloon door, she ran to the ancient tower.

Before she got there, Lelia knew what she would find. They had been too happy, and such love provokes the wrath of the gods—or so she tried to tell herself. But a small, still voice shrieked in her brain: Lelia Savage, you killed him—your great love—and you are damned.

"No!" she shouted to the empty rooms. "I fixed it. He's not dead . . ."

Jared Stoner was lying at the foot of the staircase, and she knew from the position of his head that his neck was broken.

Taking her darling's face in her hands, Lelia knelt beside him, bending over him, weeping, kissing his dead lips. Beside him lay a candle, a key, and a casket of jewels. One look at them, and at the ring clutched tightly in his hand, and she realized their significance: years before her mother had mentioned the Stoner family jewels. And he had been bringing them to her—his bride.

Years of hardship had taught Lelia great caution, and she knew her peril. Taking the diamond ring out of his strong grasp, she returned it to the casket. Then, with trembling fingers, she replaced his signet ring on his hand. Lighting the candle, she picked up the casket and key and began the nightmare ascent up the spiral stairs. This time the feeble light shone upon desperate scratch marks on the walls, which would account for his bruised and bleeding fingers. Up, up, up she went until she

came to that hideous stair. *She had fixed it.* No, it stood gaping, just as it had when she had learned its awful secret. Bending down, she tested the pivot. It was loose—the way it had been before she fixed it. With a handkerchief, she tightened it up again. How could it have slipped? Was the mechanism rotting? Or had she locked it only in a dream?

Sick with grief and terror, Lelia loosened it again and crept up to the tower room. The key unlocked it. Pushing it open, a brief look disclosed a storage room; one rarely visited, judging by the amount of dust on the floor. She set down the casket on a ledge, out of sight of the entrance way, then started back.

At the top of the steps, a wave of dizziness hit her, and she had a frantic impulse to throw herself down the stairs and join him in death. But horror stopped her—not a fear of death—but a fear that she would not die but only linger in a helpless state between life and death, so that when they came for him, her secret would be exposed and she would hang for her love's murder.

Gingerly, Lelia made her way down until she reached his corpse. She had almost an hour before a search would have to be started. One hour alone with him . . . Tenderly, she picked up the wounded head and laid it on her lap. Stroking his face, she gave him all the words of love she'd been denying him those many months. When it was time to go, she kissed away her tears from his pale face.

Everyone would call it an accident. How could it be otherwise? The mechanism was defective, the stair had collapsed—that was all. But she must not be the one to find the body, Lelia thought grimly.

Reentering the main corridor, she hastened to the library and checked the clock. It was five-thirty. She would wait a half-hour, and then send out an inquiry. Thirty minutes crawled by. In a cold sweat, Lelia counted out each minute. My God, she thought, I willed his death. Why couldn't I have willed his life?

Six o'clock. She rang the bellpull. A maid answered and Lelia told her to get Mr. Stoner—she needed to

consult him about the cataloguing. Back she came. Mr. Stoner was not around. Somewhat impatiently, Lelia encouraged her to look again. Outwardly calm, she then went up to dress for dinner. Like an actress preparing for a role, Lelia readied herself: hiding the tear-stained face with powder, rouging the cheeks lightly, and brushing the hair smoothly over her neck to cover love's mark. One black dress was changed for another, and her underclothes stripped and replaced so that no trace of Jared would linger on her body. Finally, the inevitable could no longer be delayed. She went downstairs.

The household was in an uproar. He was still missing. Servants were everywhere, calling back and forth.

Pacing nervously in the windowed corridor, Lelia happened to glance into the study. Kezia Stoner sat at her son's desk, a white paper clasped in her thin hands. How long Kezia had been observing her Lelia had no idea, but it was a malevolent look—a mocking reflection of Jared's eyes. Her voice rasped: "Did you know, Mrs. Lockwood, that my son broke his engagement?"

With hands clasped, Lelia faced her coolly. "No, he doesn't discuss his personal affairs with me."

"Too preoccupied, eh?" She rose from the chair.

Reeves brushed past Lelia, drawn and shaking. "Mrs. Stoner, ma'am—"

"Yes?"

"They've found him."

"Where?"

"In the south tower, ma'am. He appears to have had a fall."

Lelia stood by the door like one turned to stone, waiting for the outcry, for Kezia Stoner to scream or faint. But she did no such thing. She pulled herself up to her full height, and walked by the younger woman, unseeing. Reeves followed and Lelia was left alone in Jared's study.

Only hours ago he had tried to kiss her right where she was standing. I must go to the tower, she told herself shakily. If I don't go, it will look peculiar. Everyone must be there. I can't risk any suspicion . . .

It was as hard for Lelia to walk back into that appalling scene, as it had been to run away from her dead child. Only fear and an instinct for self-preservation gave her courage. This time a ring of wailing, distraught servants surrounded his body, keeping them apart, for which she was profoundly grateful. Above the murmur of voices, rose a keening noise like that of an animal in pain. Gradually, it dawned on her shocked senses that it was Kezia Stoner.

The group contracted, then expanded as people slipped in and out, leaving a gap through which Lelia could see. As she had sat, such a short time before, now sat the mother, holding her dead son's head in her lap, crooning a mindless tune. Lelia turned away, full of pain. Opening a small brooch, she deliberately jammed the pin into her palm to mute her torment.

Lelia could safely leave now. She had been noticed. She had her witnesses. She told Reeves that she would be in the library if anyone needed her. Alone in that room, she began to pace like a doomed creature. Impossible to rest, even though she was exhausted. Up and down . . . up and down. Finally, Reeves came back.

"Mrs. Stoner is prostrate, ma'am. Do you think you could send telegrams to the relatives?"

"Yes, certainly." She nodded dully.

"And the solicitors?"

"Of course."

"And anyone else who . . ."

She was making notes. "I'm sure Mr. Jeffrey would want to be here."

"We sent for the doctor and the police," he added delicately.

"I'll get this out immediately and ring for you." The prospect of work made her tone brisk.

"Can I bring you something to eat, Mrs. Lockwood?"

"No, nothing . . ." Watching him head for the door, she remembered that the address book was in Jared's study. The thought of going there was agony, and she gave Reeves the task. On his return, she set to work. Her hand shook so badly, several of the wires had to

be rewritten. Indeed, her message to Adam was almost illegible, and had to be redone three times. At length it was finished, and she summoned the butler.

Taking the stack from her, Reeves said, "Dr. Perrin and the police would like a word with you, ma'am."

Trying to hide her alarm, Lelia asked quietly, "Are they seeing everyone?"

"Yes, they're in Mr. Stoner's study."

She thought bitterly, Why didn't you leave me one thing of yours—a letter, a loved object, a child. A child . . . She stumbled getting up and Reeves looked at her in concern.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Lockwood?"

"Yes, thank you," she muttered, watching the carpet sway under her feet. A whiff of smelling salts restored her, and they set off for the study, Reeves hovering at her side. Lelia wondered if prison would be like this—someone always at her shoulder.

Ingoldisthorpe's constable was seated at the desk. Dr. Perrin sat on the couch before the fireplace. A second officer prowled the room, his eyes keenly observant.

Lelia Savage faced them calmly.

"Just a few questions, ma'am," said the constable. "You're Mrs. —"

"Lockwood."

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Lockwood." He studied her. "A melancholy business this. When did you last see Mr. Stoner alive, ma'am?"

When he was making love to me, screamed her inward voice.

"I don't know," Lelia spoke distantly. "After his return from London—sometime during the afternoon, I think."

"Do you know why he went to the tower?"

"No." She shrugged.

For a moment there was silence. Glances were exchanged, and she wondered if they were recalling that other inquisition for Lady Margaret. But she was dismissed. Dr. Perrin nodded to her briefly as she exited.

Having passed the first test, she fled to her haven in the library, remaining there until eleven o'clock. A tray of decanters stood in the room, and she fortified herself with a glass or two of sherry. When the old clock struck the hour, she swept out of the room and ran into Reeves, as she knew she would.

"What is to happen, Reeves?"

"The funeral will be the day after tomorrow. They're taking him to his own room tonight. No coffin hereabouts will fit him. Has to be made. He's too big a man."

Ever efficient, Lelia asked, "Did the telegrams go off?"

"Yes, ma'am."

At the bottom of the staircase they parted. Slowly and thoughtfully, Lelia climbed up the stairs to her room. She had assumed he would lie in the drawing room. This news was more than she ever dared hope for. In her chamber, she sat rigidly in the wing chair until it was almost midnight, then undressed and put on her night clothes. Seated before the mirror, she undid her hair and watched it tumble loose. Rivers of gold, he had called it. She followed her routine, and brushed it carefully. The mantle clock struck twelve. Opening her door a crack, she listened. Not a sound. Far down the hall, a night light flickered. Reeves had made his rounds, and she was safe until morning.

Locking the door, she picked up a lamp and carried it over to the fireplace. Dear God! What if she couldn't find the mechanism? Scraping and scratching, her hands explored every inch of the wall. A tiny acorn in the wainscoting was slightly out of line from its companions. Lelia touched it and the panel sprang back. Pushing the door ajar as far as it would go, she anchored it with a chair so that the way back would not be barred. With a frantically beating heart, she raised the lamp and stepped into the passage. Before, walking with Jared, conscious only of him, she had paid scant attention to the route. Now, feeling her way along, repelled by the darkness, she prayed that she could

open the panel at the other end. What a horrible irony it would be to be separated from him by only a few yards. On and on the passage went. Grotesque shadows danced on the wall . . . a rat scurried across the floor. At last she came to the end. Again, her hands groped for the wall's secret, and some miracle guided them. A click—the panel flung open and she walked into her darling's bedroom.

Keeping her head, Lelia seized a chair and propped the door open. In the darkness the bracket clock on the mantelpiece ticked away remorselessly. Light from a full moon shone into the chamber through a half open curtain, casting an eerie radiance.

Jared Stoner was lying on his bed, his head supported by a pillow. Someone had wisely shifted his body so that he lay not flat on his back, but slightly to one side. So relaxed was his attitude, he might have been asleep. Her night lamp softened his satanic beauty, erasing all pain and bitterness. How often had she seen that peaceful look as he slept in her arms.

Setting down the lamp on the bedside table, so that it highlighted his features, Lelia lay down beside him on the large bed and took him in her arms. Kissing the cold, dead face she began to weep. She beseeched him to forgive her for her murderous act. Driven almost mad by his lack of response, she shook him, crying in fury, "You can't leave me, Jared! You can't, my darling!"

A mocking, ironic look met her in the strange light. With a heartbroken sob, she lay on his chest, but the tweed jacket and cotton shirt kept her from his naked heart. She tore them open angrily. Resting on his breast, in vain did she listen for his dead heart to awaken.

Nothing. Never in her life had Lelia felt so alone. A void stretched before her, waiting to swallow her up. In one terrifying moment, she realized that not only had she killed the great love of her life, but she had destroyed herself as well. By now, she had taken all the blame on herself. How could it be otherwise? She had set the devil's trap in motion, and in so doing had

wrecked the safety mechanism. She had murdered this man who had brought her the sun and moon on his lips, who had set her heart on fire with a moss rose and with his love . . .

A lifetime of tears flowed from her. She implored him to take her with him. She begged him not to leave her alone. . . .

Sick with despair, exhausted, and utterly bereft, she fell asleep, clasping his hard, strong body. When she awoke she had no idea where she was. Finding herself in her love's arms, for a long joyous moment she felt she was awakening in the night hours after the rapture of the afternoon. Ardently stretching against him, her lips reached for his in passionate yearning.

Cold lips stabbed her soul. Ah, God, he was so cold . . . so cold. . . .

Lelia caressed his face as tenderly as a mother might her newborn child. Never to forget each feature . . . to burn that face into her soul.

"Promise me, my darling. Not to leave me—ever. Ever . . ."

Her hair fell about him, keeping him warm.

The bracket clock struck six. Again, she kissed his dead lips. Pressed his cold hand to her heart.

"Come for me soon, Jared. Don't make me wait too long . . ."

Once more she embraced him, lying on him as a lover. Their lips met . . . her body arched in a spasm of agony, and she cried out, his head at her breast.

A door slammed in the distance.

Rising from the bed, Lelia straightened the bed-spread and pillows, buttoned his shirt and jacket and tenderly placed him in the position she had found him. Her hand brushed against his signet ring—her wedding ring.

Seizing the lamp, she fled from his room, back through the damp passageway, into her own chamber. Releasing the chair, she numbly watched the panel swing shut. Wild shadows flitted on the walls, as the lamplight vied with breaking day. She leaned in a daze

against the panel. *Why had she left him alone?* Wild with terror, she tried to get back into the passage, but this time the odd little acorn eluded her despairing grasp. Her fingers tore at the woodwork, but no amount of frantic sobbing helped to find the panel again. An eternity separated them.

Lelia knew then that she would spend the rest of her life trying to return to him.

Morning and she was alive. Her ravaged features glared from the mirror. Take one step at a time, she told herself grimly, as she bathed her red eyes in a vinegar and water solution. Whatever happened, she had to pass muster before the household. She wondered at her desire for self-preservation. The impulse for suicide was great, but there was no poisonous medication to drink, and the thought of throwing herself out of a window appalled her. Even more frightening was another way to death: to confess her crime to the police and face the terrible retribution. She had no wish to be hanged.

If only he would give me a sign, she thought, of what he wants me to do. . . .

In the midst of her despairing reverie, Bridget appeared with morning tea, very down in the dumps, and Mrs. Lockwood's alarming mood struck her as not at all unusual under the circumstances. Gulping the tea, Lelia bathed her face, pinned up her hair, and slipped into her widow's weeds.

Nauseous and faint, she spent the entire morning waiting for a summons. The pale light of early morning turned into a harsh midday glare, and still she sat. She had sent word to Reeves that she was available, should anyone need her. But clearly her services were not in demand, until Mrs. Stoner's maid knocked on the door with a request. Mrs. Stoner wished to see Mrs. Lockwood. With quaking heart, Lelia complied.

Kezia Stoner's suite was in the north wing, down from Lady Margaret's; a lovely set of rooms overlooking the Italian garden . . . The beautiful furniture and

bric-a-brac showed that poverty had not been allowed to set foot in here. Dismayed, Lelia halted on the threshold of the bedroom. Mrs. Stoner lay in bed, lounging delicately on a mound of pillows. As always the facial resemblance to her son was startling, and now heart-breaking. A quick glance around the room revealed a full length portrait of Tobias Stoner, a big man like Jared, but lacking his son's vigor. It was a weak, self-indulgent face. Her father's friend.

Kezia Stoner beckoned to her.

Approaching the bed, Lelia stopped at the foot and waited.

"You were my son's mistress, weren't you?"

"No!"

The dark eyes glittered with hatred. "Oh, yes, you were, Mrs. Lockwood."

Regaining her poise, Lelia answered coldly, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I beg to differ, Mrs. Lockwood. I saw it all. I saw everything he thought he could hide from me." She laughed mirthlessly. "I've watched him with other whores he brought into this house and I've seen the difference. He was mad about you."

Lelia's cheeks flushed scarlet. Turning abruptly, she tried to leave but the venomous voice pinned her down.

"I was his mother. He couldn't deceive me. Not after so many years of unhappiness with Margaret. He ached with love for you." She spat the words. "I used to see you walking together sometimes in the garden. When no one was looking—or so he thought—he would kiss or embrace you. Or was this part of your secretarial duties, Mrs. Lockwood?"

"You're lying." Lelia felt her heart contract.

A shriek burst from the wizened figure. "You were his mistress!"

"No!" The cry came from her soul. I was his *love*.

"You were his mistress and you killed him."

They faced one another in grievous hatred.

Mrs. Stoner began to weep. The tears seemed to scar her proud old face in the harsh light. "I don't know

how you did it, or why, Mrs. Lockwood, but you killed my son."

Lelia shrank back. "You lie! You lie . . ."

"Why did he break his engagement?" Her voice dropped. "Or did you break it for him after you murdered him?"

With a shudder, Lelia headed for the door. Tobias Stoner's face mocked her from the wall, filling her with loathing. Behind her rose a thin wall.

"I once knew a child named Lelia—"

"Did you now?" Lelia turned. "Perhaps you'd like to know my maiden name, Mrs. Stoner?"

She blinked.

"It's Savage. Lelia Savage." She smiled cruelly. "Do you remember my parents? My father was a frequent visitor at Richmond Hill. Don't you remember him? Nathaniel Savage was his name."

"Oh, my God!" Mrs. Stoner collapsed into the pillows. "He killed himself."

"Yes, in a brothel, leaving my mother destitute. Your husband—his best friend—cheated him out of eighty thousand pounds."

Terror stricken, she cried, "And you took Jared in revenge!"

"Now, why would I do that if I loved him?" Lelia smiled again.

"Get out. Get out of here! Your wages are on my desk in the other room. Take them and be gone. I want you out of Richmond Hill immediately!" Harsh sobs racked her body, and Lelia had the dubious pleasure of witnessing her terrible grief.

If she had set a match to the place, she could not have had a more satisfactory vengeance, Lelia thought, her heart breaking. Financial ruin for the family, so many deaths . . . A heap of sovereigns—her reward—lay on the desk. Sweeping them into her hands, she wiped her eyes, and left the old woman's suite.

Packing took all of ten minutes. Dressed and ready to leave, she rang the bellpull. Bridget entered, looking red-faced and greedily curious. Gossip must have been

flaming in the kitchen. Giving her a coin for her kind services, Lelia requested a carriage for Hunstanton. Waiting alone in the room, she gazed unseeingly out of the windows, afraid to face the bed where they had known such love. Dread still prodded her every movement. Mrs. Stoner with her suspicions was a great danger. What if she went to the police? Would they believe her accusation, or dismiss it as the delusion of a grieving mother?

Summoned by a knock on the door, Lelia walked out of her bedroom, down the back stairs, through the long-windowed corridor to the front door. Reeves had the courtesy to bid her farewell, and then Lelia Savage was whirled down the driveway without a backward glimpse at Richmond Hill.

III.

Journey's End

15.



LELIA booked a small room at The Golden Sovereign, similar to the one she had taken so many months ago. It was tiny, but with a view of backstreet gardens bursting with spring flowers and new leaves. Street sellers bawled their wares, children shrilled laughter, and housewives called to one another in the streets. Dear God, what had he thought of during that murderous fall? That she had killed him? Or had there been no time . . . no time before his neck broke. Removing her bonnet and ulster, she closed the window, shutting out sounds of life. What was to become of her? Collapsing on the bed, Lelia began to laugh. She couldn't believe it. How could such a vital man die so quickly? God forgive her, she had been *sleeping* when he died. Hoarse sobs replaced the fit of laughter, and the pillow was soon damp with tears.

A loud rapping on the door awoke her to darkness and a strange room. Lelia's cry of alarm ushered in the maid, who brought sanity back by turning up the gas-light and informing her that Mr. Jeffrey awaited her below.

Adam, she thought, her head groggy, her heart pounding. How many days ago had she sent that telegram? Wearily, Lelia checked her appearance in the small mirror over the bureau. Fixing her chignon, she dabbed on some powder to hide her reddened eyes.

He was waiting for her in the foyer, and she had to admit that she was glad to see him. My friend, she

thought. My only friend . . . With a smile, he escorted her into one of the private rooms.

"Well, Lelia," he exclaimed, surveying her. "Never did I expect to meet you like this."

Blinking back tears, she focused on her clenched hands. "How did you find me?"

"Well, Reeves knew you'd gone to Hunstanton, and I dragged it out of the coachman that he'd left you here." Awkwardly, he gave her hand a pat. "I'm sorry, my dear, that it's all been so wretched."

"Was it an accident?" Lelia's voice rose unsteadily. Was Kezia Stoner already spreading her poison?

"Certainly, it was an accident," he cried angrily. "What else could it be? I told him to fix the damned thing years ago. They think he was in such a hurry that he ran up two steps at a time. On his return, he came down more slowly and landed on the step with his full weight. It collapsed under him."

"Have you seen Dr. Perrin?"

"Yes. Fortunately, he was killed instantly. There would have been no pain."

Sitting opposite him, she grew faint, and watched his image waver. Perspiration beaded her forehead.

He stood up in concern. "Lelia!" he cried, touching her shoulder with a gentle hand.

She looked into his eyes, as despairing as her own.

Wiping her face with his handkerchief, he asked anxiously: "You're not going to faint, are you?" As she shook her head, he smiled in relief. "Good girl! Now, I want you to join me for dinner. Frankly, you look as if you could do with a good meal."

Her smile was wan. "Aren't you supposed to dine with Mrs. Stoner?"

A splotch of red touched his cheeks. "I had a bit of a row with her today. I'm seeing her tomorrow at the funeral—maybe a brief chat tonight, and that's it. Now, let's go eat."

While they were awaiting dinner, at a quiet corner table, Adam ordered some sherry for Lelia and a whiskey and soda for himself. As he sipped the drink,

his hand shook. Tears filled his eyes, overcoming him. "It's so hard to believe—" he said. "Just when things were beginning to work out for him. Oh, not financially—still a lot of kinks in that—but he'd finally found it . . ."

"Found what?" she breathed.

"He was in love. Finally, found the woman . . . Didn't you notice?" Realizing his gaffe, he stopped. "Oh, of course, you wouldn't. Whoever she was—" He smiled in remembrance. "She was a good influence. He'd even stopped drinking."

Steeling herself, Lelia took a long sip of sherry. "What did Mrs. Stoner say to you?"

A melancholy look flitted across his fine features. "A lot of rubbish. Lies . . . old woman's ravings about you and Jared," he muttered. "Incredible story about your coming to Richmond Hill and taking vengeance on her son because of your father's ruin." His anger surprised her. She realized that she had never before seen him lose his temper.

"And you don't believe her?"

He was incredulous. "You and Jared?" And then a strange, almost bitter light clouded his eyes. "No, Lelia, I don't believe it. You were much too refined for him."

She broke into weak laughter. Fortunately, Adam attributed her outburst to strain, and the waiter's arrival with a heaping tray saved them from any further discomfort. Both busied themselves with dinner: Adam, assiduously; Lelia, made queasy by the odor of food, toying with her plate.

"Now, let's talk about your future, Lelia. What are you going to do?" The polite tone dropped and he became very direct—a manner he often adopted. He lined up events like tin soldiers in mathematical precision, leaving no room for the extraordinary. It annoyed Lelia. He made life work for him, as if it were his personal servant, whereas everything happened to her by chance, and she envied him his gift. Wealth gave him his invincible power. What did he know of poverty, starva-

tion, or heartbreak? She suspected that passion, too, was largely an alien emotion to him.

"My future . . ." Lelia reflected. My future lies broken at the bottom of a staircase. Aloud, she said, "London. I'll go back to London. Get my bearings . . . seek new employment—" She paled. "Adam, can you help me? I have no reference from Richmond Hill. Mrs. Stoner didn't give me one."

"Of course, I'll get it for you. Don't worry about anything, Lelia."

"You're so kind."

"I'll help you in any way possible," he murmured in a rush of feeling.

As casually as she could manage, Lelia said, "You must miss him very much."

"Oh, God, yes!" Biting his lip, he refilled his wine glass. "We'd been together for years—since we were boys. Not only at school, but our families visited back and forth. Richmond Hill is like my second home, and he came to Devon—" Breaking off, he gazed into space. Then he stared at Lelia curiously. "Didn't you tell me you came from Devon?"

She looked bewildered. "No. No, I don't remember—"

"Funny," he smiled. "I could have sworn you said north of Bideford."

"Did I . . . ?" She fumbled in her handbag for her smelling salts. "Silly of me to have forgotten . . ."

"And you told me your maiden name was Savage. Didn't you?" His grey eyes were darkly tender.

Fear gripped her. How much had Jared's mother told him? Jeffrey was such a gentleman, but God knew what he was thinking. "Yes, Stoner and my father were old friends," Lelia admitted with what she hoped was a charming smile. "Frequently, they gambled. On occasion, my father lost heavily to him, but it wasn't Tobias Stoner who ruined him . . ." She took a deep breath. "He ruined himself. He was a desperately sick man—syphilitic." A tear ran down her cheek. "That's why I

lied to you," she said, meeting his shocked expression. "The memory's intolerable . . ."

A strong hand gripped hers. "My poor child," he said softly. "How you must have suffered. And your lovely mother—?"

"Is dead," Lelia said flatly, again seeking his eyes. Yes, he was moved. And on her side, she hoped.

"Never mind about Kezia Stoner lashing out that way, Lelia. She can be quite vicious. Used to drive Jared wild, but then she was always jealous of a pretty woman."

Gently withdrawing her hand, Lelia traced a pattern in the tablecloth with her nail. "What time is the funeral tomorrow?"

"Eleven o'clock."

She was silent while he paid the bill.

Walking back into the foyer, she whispered to him, "Could you do one more thing for me, Adam?"

"You know I will."

"I seem to be having one of my bouts of insomnia. Ridiculous to be troubled with such a thing," she added, blushing, "but I just can't sleep. Can you get me some . . . laudanum?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that what you take?"

Remembering Lady Margaret, she hastened to reassure him. "I've never taken it. I've always used chloral. It just came to mind."

"Well, I'll get you something, don't worry," he replied, pressing her arm. "Now you wait in the parlor. I know a chemist nearby, and he'll give it to me."

As if she were a child, he led Lelia into the room, steering her to a chair away from people. Giving her a periodical to read, he said quietly, "Just rest. I'll be back soon." He was as good as his word, returning before the clock struck nine. A small, brown-paper package was placed in her hand.

"It's laudanum," he said, sotto voce. "You know how to take it?"

She nodded.

"Just a few drops in water should do the trick. Take

it before retiring and get a good night. Now, tomorrow—" He drew up a chair. "I'm coming here after the funeral to lunch with you so that we can discuss your future."

"Shouldn't you stay with Mrs. Stoner?"

"No," he said firmly. "I'll give her all the support I can for the funeral—" A spasm of anguish crossed his face. "Then I'm coming to you. You have no one? No family?" He gave her a hard look.

"All dead," Lelia replied, so distinctly that heads turned in her direction. She headed abruptly for the main staircase, a solicitous Adam at her side.

"This has been a tragic experience for you, Lelia. Are you going to be all right?"

Whispering an assent, she sagged against the banister. "What will you do now?"

"Return to Richmond Hill—" he answered sorrowfully. "Then I'll sit with Jared."

God, how Lelia envied him. Just to be able to see that face again. In her misery, she almost cried aloud. Instead she took leave of Adam Jeffrey. "Thank you for being such a good friend . . ."

Very gently, he kissed her hand. "Sleep peacefully."

Adam Jeffrey, on his errand of mercy, had brought Lelia exactly what she wanted—a bottle of laudanum, about the size of the one last used by Lady Margaret, slightly larger than those she used to purchase in King's Lynn. This one, she knew, held a fatal dose, and there was no need to visit chemist after chemist on the morrow, trying to buy a second or even a third bottle. How stupid the man was! Or did he trust her? she wondered, in shame.

One more night. One more awful night to endure until Lelia could safely journey to Ingoldisthorpe at dusk. Find his grave and join him in death. . . .

She couldn't sleep. All night long the dead kept her company. Her mother's voice echoed sharply in her ear: *You did it, darling. Killed Stoner . . .* While David, her little boy, playing tag, ran away from her into the

water-meadows. In the lamp light, a crowd of servants, encircling a body, shifted back and forth—like water lilies—so that at intervals she saw her beloved lying on the floor, his head twisted at an unnatural angle. Dear God! Why hadn't she heard him leave her? Again and again, Lelia walked to those stairs and saw the same terrible sight. So great was her despair, she thought of killing herself that night.

Streaks of grey light filtered over Jared's ashen face, speckling the floor, and it was morning. The dead vanished. In came a cheerful maid with hot water and a steaming teapot. Ignoring both, Lelia sat dully in a chair waiting for eleven o'clock, a tumbler and the laudanum bottle at her side. Her hair was unbound; she hadn't even bothered to change her dress. In the midst of her despondency, a wave of nausea sharpened her wits. What if she were pregnant? Certainly, she was weeks late and fatigue, queasiness, and fainting attacks were not her customary mode of health. My God, she couldn't kill his child, too. Even her breasts were tender as they had been in the early stages of pregnancy with David. Touching herself in wonder, she made the wish a reality, feeling his child growing big within her. She would do anything—anything to keep his baby.

Rising, she went to the window, transfigured with hope. The backstreet gardens had gone, and by some trick of the imagination, Lelia was back in the walled garden at Richmond Hill. Down the graveled walk came a man, and, with a joyous cry, she held out her arms as Jared Stoner approached. *Lelia! Lelia!* he called, making her name reverberate in the gardens and corridors of Richmond Hill.

Outside, in the inn's hallway, she heard the tall clock strike the hour. It was eleven o'clock. She took a deep breath, feeling a stab of pain in her heart. Jared embraced her and the pain became intense, like a hand squeezing her heart. Slowly, slowly the hand tightened. Gasping for air, she cried out, trying to open the window. A small table crashed to the floor as she fainted.

Lelia was conscious of a face floating above her. It appeared and disappeared for some time before she could properly focus. Adam.

"Don't try to speak, my dear," he said tenderly. "You've been very ill, Lelia." Taking out a handkerchief, he mopped his face with a trembling hand. "I was afraid . . . really afraid we were going to lose you."

"What . . . happened?" she mouthed the words.

"We're not certain. The doctor said it had all the signs of a heart attack, but found your heart surprisingly healthy. Whatever—" He shrugged, mystified. "The morning of Jared's funeral, you apparently fainted, and the people below heard the table hit the floor. They alerted the maid, who had sense enough to call a doctor. Providential, I call it." He smiled. "A few minutes delay and you would have been dead."

"So close . . . so close," she breathed in agony.

"What, dearest?"

"How . . . long?"

"Oh, it's been a little over ten days."

"Did I say . . . anything?"

"No, you weren't delirious. You've been in a coma." He mused. "Strange that it occurred just as he was being buried—"

Tears ran down her cheeks. God damn him! she thought. He's cheated me of my death. Snatched me out of my darling's arms. . . .

"Lelia! You mustn't upset yourself. The doctor is quite insistent about this. Oh, sweet!" Sitting on the bed, he took her hand. "He's dead and buried. Don't grieve . . ."

He began to massage her forehead, keeping his husky voice low. "I know about you and Jared."

"Know what?" Feebly, Lelia tried to rise.

"Only what he told me." Adam pressed her back against the pillow. "That your life was unfortunate. Betrayal by a nobleman. Death of the child born of that union. And Jared confessed—" He flinched at the memory. "That he, himself, had several times assaulted you. Used you like a common slut. Berating him for

his cruelty, I was informed that he'd done with you. Nevertheless, I maintained that he was taking a risk with your heart—"

"My heart?"

"Yes, a danger that you might become infatuated."

"And what did he say?" she asked in a small voice.

"He thought that highly unlikely. I, myself—" He squeezed her hand. "Think it happened and I share your distress. That's what we quarreled about at Christmas. Don't waste time on him, Lelia. He's not worth it, and he picked up with someone else—"

"I have never wasted time on him, Adam. Be certain of that."

For a moment, he looked quite crushed, more vulnerable than she had ever seen him. Not even disgust could hide his love for Jared, even though that love warred with all his principles. Why had he chosen this particular moment to confide in her? He felt a genuine fondness for her, perhaps, coupled with a need to reassure her that he didn't blame her for his friend's failing. Most decent men would have left her. Lelia was fascinated that he stayed.

"Now, no more sad talk." His smile was charming. "We've got to get you well. And you're not to worry about anything."

"Money," she reminded him. "I haven't much."

"Well, I have lots," he laughed, "so don't fret. We'll concentrate on the future when you're well."

Lelia looked at him gravely. "How did you get in here with me?"

"Told them I was your cousin." He flushed. "Worked like a charm."

For the first time she smiled. "Cousin Adam." Nestling into the pillows, she closed her eyes. "May I sleep now?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

She thought his lips brushed her forehead as she drifted off to sleep.

Lelia's recovery was rapid because Adam would have it no other way. He saw that she was well-fed, had no

worries, and plenty of rest. Oddly enough, her dreams vanished during this period. Later she learned that she was being regularly sedated with chloral. Although she had two nurses, Adam gave her much attention. They dined together and he read to her daily, working his way through several of Dickens' novels in that melodious, husky voice which would have made an actor proud. On doctor's orders, he took her riding about Hunstanton, and when her strength had fully returned and exercise was recommended, he escorted her on walks.

But the real reason for Lelia's splendid progress was a passionate belief that she was still pregnant. Only a month or two more and the baby would start to move . . .

Bewitched with love, ecstatic to be carrying Jared's child, one day Lelia foolishly asked her day nurse if she'd had any female complaints during her illness. Oh, yes, said the nurse, smashing her world to pieces—your monthly. Had it been a miscarriage? she wondered to herself in agony, but knew she couldn't ask. She was supposed to be a widow. And all those weeks and weeks of yearning, feeding her desperate hope, were washed away in a river of blood drowning her love child.

Adam, who had attributed her growing good spirits to his constant devotion, now linked Lelia's great unhappiness to a sudden, quite natural concern for her welfare. What was to become of her? An alarming thought, and one he set about righting. She marveled he could be so easily deceived.

Coming right to the point, he said brightly, "Now, what are we going to do about you?"

They were in her small room. "I don't know," she replied miserably, leaning against the iron bedstead.

"Lelia, I have a proposition to put to you." He was pacing the floor. "One I pray meets with your approval. I have an aunt—a dear, sweet soul—who lives about a mile from me in Devon, and she recently lost her companion. I think you'd be perfect for her."

She gaped at him.

"Well, what about it?"

"Adam . . . Adam!" she cried as if to a willful school-boy. "You know my past. And you call me a fit companion for your aunt?"

His gay mood changed to a grave one. "You must understand one thing, Lelia. Years ago, I saw your promise in Devon, and I cannot hold you responsible for the tragedies in your life. Jared and that other man are to blame for your transgressions. I don't share the popular view, my dear, that a woman is damned because of a few unfortunate affairs."

Touched by his words, Lelia sat numbly. Approaching the bed with a tense face, he leaned down, and she braced herself for his kiss. And for the indecent proposal to follow. But she did the man a great injustice. It wasn't lust he wanted, but friendship. Shyly, he kissed her hand, saying, "Well, what do you say?"

"I'd be a fool not to take it," Lelia reasoned. No doubt that was too honest, and she softened it with a smile. "Yes, Adam, I will. Thanks."

His grey eyes shone with delight. "Let's celebrate and buy you some new clothes."

"But I'm in mourning," she protested.

"That's a bit of a fiction, isn't it, dear?"

At her shameful nod, he continued in a gentle tone, "Don't feel badly. You can still be 'Mrs. Lockwood,' but let's dispense with the mourning. Black's too depressing for such a lovely woman." He smiled. "My aunt adores fine clothes. Let's give her something pretty to look at." And whisking her off to the best shop in town, he purchased some charming ready-made dresses, a stylish new coat, a hat, shoes, and accessories. In her new wardrobe, elegantly simple, Lelia aped the genteel widow who has cast mourning aside but has not forgotten her loved one. Completing the picture was her triste air, she thought acidly, studying her reflection in the store's cheval glass. Why was Jeffrey aiding and abetting this deception? Because the man pities you, Lelia Savage, she told herself grimly. Pities you.

At dinner that evening, she made her final appearance as the "widow," melancholy in black.

"We'll leave tomorrow morning and spend the night in London," said her companion.

Her face drained of color. "London? Why?"

"Well, we have to make a stop. You're not strong enough to make the entire journey in a day."

She drank some wine to nerve herself. "Yes, of course. Would you excuse me then, Adam? I'll pack now and get an early night." In a great hurry to get away, she ignored his sudden look of alarm.

Upstairs, methodically searching through her old clothes, Lelia located the unopened laudanum bottle tucked away in a bureau drawer. Dropping it into her handbag, she next drew out that lovely dress bought in Chelsea, which Michael had labeled Rossetti's folly, but which Jared had adored. Wrapping herself in the flowing gown, she took down her hair, flung on her coat, and rang for the maid.

"Please order me a carriage," Lelia said at her appearance.

"Where would you like to go, ma'am?"

She stared out at the darkness. "Ingoldisthorpe."

Lelia's one thought now was to die. Losing Jared's child—if child it had been—had freed her from this life. She had no obligation to anyone. And certainly not to the gullible Adam Jeffrey. She had agreed to go to Devon only to allay his suspicions. Women don't usually accept new wardrobes and then commit suicide.

She stepped out of her room and hurried down the staircase, pushing her way impatiently through knots of visitors and guests to the front door. The carriage stood waiting at the curb. A hand touched her arm.

"Lelia?"

Pulling back in shock, Lelia saw Adam Jeffrey, looking pained and bewildered. With a cry of anguish, she leaned against the cab and began to weep. Sensing drama, the cabbie retreated behind his horse, pretending not to listen.

"Lelia, where are you going?" Her coat was un-

buttoned, revealing the colorful but inappropriate gown. With her hair blowing in the wind and her distraught manner, he must have sensed her objective. People passed them, staring. Finally, taking her arm, Adam pushed her into the carriage.

"Where are you going?" he asked again, white-faced.

God, why didn't she blurt out the truth then? Confess that Jared Stoner had been her lover—the only man she had ever loved. But she couldn't. She was too much of a coward. How could Adam Jeffrey comprehend the depths of their love? How could he comprehend the desperate craving which touched every facet of their lives? Adam was too fastidious a man to understand the wild, passionate thing they had made. He would insist that she go to the police if she admitted her guilt.

His voice was flat. "You can't go back to Richmond Hill."

Still the tears flowed, angry and despairing. God, why wouldn't he let her go!

Putting an arm about her shoulder, he tried to console her. "The infatuation and shock of his death will go, Lelia. Believe me." Leaning out the window, he yelled something to the cabbie, then turned back to her. "Let's take a last drive around Hunstanton. It's lovely at night." Lights flickering, people laughing and talking, the heady scent of flowers, the warm night . . . Lelia saw nothing except a grave in a cemetery. Adam sat rigidly beside her, gripping her hand until it hurt, lest she jump out of the cab and elude him. By the time they returned to the inn, she was exhausted.

Helping her inside, he whispered: "Would you like me to come up and sit with you for a while?"

No, she screamed to herself—I don't want you at all. But she was in a state of terror, worn out with frustration. "Could you?" she begged.

With a light laugh to cover his uneasiness, he said, "I'm your cousin, remember?" Waiting outside in the corridor until she was in bed, at her call he came in. He drew up a chair and sat beside her.

"There's nothing worse than unrequited love," he said.

Lelia lay back on the pillows, shattered by the events of the day. Afraid to kill herself here . . . something was wrong with the room. It was too far from Jared.

"Can you give me a sleeping draught?"

"Of course, dear. Where is it?"

A foolish move, perhaps, but she knew that if she didn't seek his help now, she might not leave the room alive.

"In my purse." Lelia shook her head, indicating that she wanted him to open it.

Complying with her wish, he felt among the contents and slowly extracted the full bottle of laudanum. For a long moment he stared at it, at last admitting her intention to himself.

"Please, a few drops . . ."

Filling a tumbler with water, he put in several drops, then slipped the bottle into his coat pocket.

She took it from him. Both their hands were shaking.

"I'll read a bit," he said in a conversational tone, and picked up Mr. Dickens. It was a work they both knew but its familiarity was comforting. When Lelia began to get sleepy, he held her hand.

"Don't grieve, Lelia . . ."

The maid awoke Lelia in the morning and stayed with her—on Adam's orders, most likely—helping her to dress and pack, until he stopped by and took her to breakfast. While he was arranging their departure, Lelia again found herself with the maid, who handled her so cautiously that she suspected her "cousin" had warned of a relapse. But she was grateful to be kept from the horrors of being alone.

They left Hunstanton by train, and Adam had to force Lelia into the carriage. Of that ghastly journey to London, she remembered nothing except a despair so great that she began to think Adam was right—she was having another breakdown. It was clearly a crisis of sorts, and Adam watched her like a hawk; at each stop making her drink a glass of sherry to dull her agony.

Gradually, tears turned into lethargy, and she sat stupefied by the window, watching the flat beauties of East Anglia recede in the distance. Reaching the outskirts of London, a new fear gripped her. What if they ran into someone who knew her from the old days? One of her many paramours. . . .

On the way to the hotel, Adam spoke to her quietly: "Lelia, I don't want to leave you alone tonight. Because you haven't a maid, and I'm not certain I can engage one, I want to stay with you as your husband."

She pulled away to her side of the brougham. With any other man that meant trouble. "You don't trust me, do you?" she asked, glaring.

"You've been under a terrible strain."

"You don't trust me?" she repeated sharply.

"No," he looked chagrined. "So I'm asking you to let me stay with you." His voice dropped. "I won't hurt you."

Tears filled her eyes, remembering her love saying, "I won't hurt you anymore, Lelia. Rest against me, sweet."

"And nothing's going to hurt me, eh?" she questioned Adam, bitterly.

"Nothing's going to hurt you."

Bold as brass, they stayed together at Claridge's in a grand suite, registering as Mr. and Mrs. Adam Cargill Jeffrey. What irony, Lelia thought. To masquerade as Mrs. Jeffrey—once her mother's dearest hope. Now, all she needed was to run into one of Lord and Lady Hunt's innumerable relatives, friends, or acquaintances, who would alert the naive man at her side as to her true and vicious nature.

With such worries, Lelia was in a state of near collapse, and she and her "husband" went straight up to their suite, which was lavish enough for the Prince of Wales. After an elaborate dinner served in the drawing room, Adam made her relax in a hot bath and then go right to bed. The perfect gentleman, he remained in his bedroom, until she had put on her nightdress and slid between the sheets of the large double bed.

Again, Mr. Dickens served them well. Listening to the husky voice, Lelia tossed and turned wearily on the satin pillows. Adam disappeared into his bedroom, returning with a medicine bottle and half a glass of wine.

"Restless tonight, aren't you?" he commented. "I'll give you some chloral." Pouring a bit into the glass, he handed it to her.

Drinking it down, she made a face.

"Now, let's continue with Mr. Dickens, shall we?" and the pleasant voice went on and on, until Lelia sat bolt upright.

"Something's wrong. You've given me too much," she cried.

"Nonsense."

An edge of excitement in his voice alarmed her. Trying to get out of bed, she found that her legs were almost immobile. She could barely move. Only once before had she been so helpless. He was breathing heavily, watching her.

"God, Adam, what's the matter! What's happening?"

The light was beginning to sear her eyes. Objects wavered in the distance. Mirrors, of all sizes and shapes, began to close in on her. Her head reeled, and she found herself back in that hellish room in St. James's Square. Lord Hunt took off his top hat and cape, but the man who approached her so avidly was Adam Jeffrey. He stood before her, proud and handsome, his face a mask of lust. Slowly opening his dressing gown, he revealed his nakedness.

Struggling to escape, Lelia screamed, "Oh, God! Not the straps! Please, not the straps, Mrs. Marshall . . ."

He slammed her against the bed in his frenzy. Lelia heard herself crying for Jared, calling for help. And her darling's voice answered, his great body protecting her from that other man's evil passion.

"How are you feeling?"

Adam sat by her bedside, looking tired and dis-

heveled, despite a beautifully tailored suit. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, enhancing his pallor.

Lelia lay still, not answering him. It must have been a dream . . . She felt no bruises . . . no defilement.

"You were right, my dear," he said, ashamed. "The dose was much too large, and you had an adverse reaction. I had to call in the house physician. You were hallucinating. Can you remember?"

"Yes," she replied, looking him straight in the eye, but he neither flinched nor appeared guilty, just deeply worried.

Sitting on the bed, he tenderly stroked her hair. "Forgive me, sweet. Incredibly stupid thing to do. I had my mind on something else when I was pouring it . . ." He sighed. "I've been up with you all night."

"I'm hungry," she announced with a smile.

He beamed. "And strong enough to go on to Devon?"

"Yes," said she, anxious for the first time to go home.

A return journey always passes more quickly. Years ago, Lelia's flight with her mother had seemed an eternity—hundreds of memories pinning them down. Now they rushed through the countryside. Adam's dark mood had lifted, and he fell into a good humor. Reaching Devon, he had the grace not to speak or interfere with Lelia's mixed emotions, but let her adjust to the homecoming at her own measure.

"Thank you for being so good to me," she said, reaching over and pressing his hand. He couldn't have looked more touched if she'd given him a kiss. Still haunted by the memory of that awful dream, and the wickedness of thinking *him* involved, Lelia apologized for causing such a bother.

"You didn't ruin my night," he replied huskily. "I would do anything for you, Lelia."

Leaning back against the seat, she regarded him with mock severity. "Now, you know, Mr. Jeffrey, you've been treating me like an invalid, but you've employed me to look after your aunt. Am I fit, do you think?"

A charming smile played about his lips. "Very."

"What did you tell her about me?"

"I told her you were widowed about three years ago, had lost your only child—a son, and that I'd met you at Richmond Hill as companion to Lady Margaret."

"It astonishes me that you're doing all this. Why?"

"I think you deserve some happiness." The grey eyes were very clear. "Is that so strange?"

"I'm not used to it." She spoke a shade tartly.

His face was grim and sad. "Don't you think it time you started."

Their eyes locked, but Lelia looked away in confusion. Would his generosity last if he knew of her London career? She doubted it. Thank God, Jared had lovingly protected her and softened the facts.

"What are you thinking about, sweet?" Adam asked tensely.

"Nothing really—" she answered in a low voice. "I just hope I live up to your expectations."

16.



1887. May. Mrs. Cargill, Adam's aunt—his father's sister—lived in Westleigh, the charming village where Lelia's father and infant brothers were buried high on a slope above the Torridge River. Any nervousness she felt about this odd coincidence evaporated at sight of her new home. In a maze of streets abounding with delightful cottages and houses, Mrs. Cargill's glittered like a jewel: a lovely Queen Anne house faced with creamy-white stone, boasting a strongly hipped roof, tall windows, and an impressive doorway. Iron railings enclosed a small flower border and dwarf box hedge. Two

magnolias had been pruned to climb the walls. Inside, the house was as elegantly serene as its mistress.

Elizabeth Cargill was a handsome, white-haired woman, whose delicate skin, fine-boned features, and vivid blue eyes proclaimed an ancient beauty. She rose as they stepped into the drawing room. Subjecting Lelia to a long scrutiny over her spectacles, she laughed gaily and held out her arms. "I knew your mother, my dear, and it's wonderful to see Daisy's loveliness again in her daughter."

The two women embraced and through tears, Lelia saw Adam watching them with taut pleasure. Over tea, Mrs. Cargill explained her varied duties. Lelia was to handle her large correspondence—widowhood had not deprived her of friendship—to amuse and read to her, and above all, to engage in all those pursuits she loved but could no longer manage, since arthritis had crippled her hands. Thus when called on, Lelia had to play the piano, embroider, sketch, or paint according to Mrs. Cargill's fancy.

All in all, it was not a hard life working for one with such a sunny disposition. Compassionate by nature, Mrs. Cargill treated her like an old and valued friend instead of a paid companion. They frequently made jaunts about the countryside, lunching in Clovelly, shopping in Bideford, or visiting the gentry on their great estates. As confidante and nurse, Lelia always had to be on the alert for the acute attacks of arthritic pain which might fell her employer for days. Then she could do little except offer comfort, give a massage, read a book, or listen to hours of gossip about the Jeffrey family and others Lelia had known in childhood. Mostly the talk centered around Adam, whom Mrs. Cargill adored. The young boy had been orphaned and left to her care when he was sixteen years old. He had come into an extraordinary estate when he was twenty-one, and tripled it by the time he was thirty. Tin mining and cloth were the basis of the fortune—now it was copper. There were land holdings in London, investments by the score.

He sat on a dozen boards. Only one thing was lacking—a wife. No woman pleased him.

In those first weeks, Lelia saw very little of Adam Jeffrey. News came from his aunt: first he went to Stoneham, his estate; next, it was to Tavistock to check his mining interests; then, he made a sojourn in London. On his return to Devon, a round of parties began: luncheons, dinners, and balls. His aunt usually attended these galas, but this series caught her during an illness. So her nephew called several times a week, uttering a few pleasantries to Lelia, then disappearing upstairs to his aunt's bedroom, alone. From his aloof manner, she had a distinct feeling that her presence irritated him, which saddened her. Was he already regretting his decision?

By late June, Mrs. Cargill was well enough to join the social whirl. Naturally, she and Lelia always ran into Adam—the most sought after man in Devon, Lelia quickly learned. At party after party, the same play would be reenacted with a different cast. Wealthy papa and wily mama would try to ensnare this rich, handsome man for a ravishingly beautiful daughter. Time and time again, he was forced to admire all the girl's tricks and gifts. Sitting quietly on the sidelines, Lelia watched the scene so often, it made her smile.

On one particular occasion, the prospective bride—an alluring person with black hair, china blue eyes, and a milky complexion—sat tinkling away at the piano with Adam trapped at her side. Taking a large swallow of fortified punch, he caught Lelia's amused eye and sauntered over, frowning.

"What are you smiling at?"

"You both look so charming together," she said, embarrassed.

"Don't you know what everyone's saying?" he asked bitterly. "It's not me she wants, it's my money."

"I think you're being rather harsh on yourself. I've always found you quite——"

"Lovable?" he interrupted, jeering.

"Mr. Jeffrey, I'm in no position to answer that."

"What do you think of me, Lelia?" he drawled, putting his face close to hers.

"I'm going to your aunt," she replied, looking down at her hands. "She may be losing at cards again, and I'll have to pull—"

A voice spoke softly in her ear: "I want to make love to you. I want to sleep with you . . ."

Shocked, she looked up into his tranquil eyes.

"Are you feeling all right, Lelia?" he asked in concern. "You're very pale."

"Just a momentary faintness," she muttered grimly. Exactly like the hotel again. She was imagining things, Lelia thought in terror.

"Lelia—"

Foolishly, she walked away without explanation, leaving him standing there, the center of attention. Perhaps, her rudeness and the awkward position it placed him in, accounted for the fact that when they came to bundle themselves into the carriage—Adam was dropping his aunt off first, then going on to his home in Weare Giffard—he was a bit drunk.

"Well, dear, what did you think of that pretty girl?" asked his aunt, hopefully.

"They're all alike. Can't tell one from the other. Just change their hair and their eyes, and you get the same stupid little creature." In the darkness, he sighed heavily. "You seem to forget that last year I was engaged to such a miss, but she eloped."

"Yes, dear," agreed his aunt, sadly. "But what is the difference between her and these others? Surely, one would make a fine wife."

"Her brother was my dearest friend," came the slurred answer. "Only for Jared would I endure such boredom."

The carriage rattled by a street lamp. A tear on Lelia's pale cheek glistened in the light.

"No, I loved someone once years ago. You remember, when I was very young. But all my wealth wasn't enough." Angry self-pity edged his voice. "A title was desired, and so my dear one married into the family of

the Marquis of Stowbridge—"Lelia's shocked cry made him pause. "What's the matter? Horse going too fast?"

"Just around that curve." She gritted her teeth.

They drove up in front of the house. Mrs. Cargill patted her nephew's knee. "Not everyone marries for love, dear."

"But I want to love the woman I marry," he cried passionately.

"What you need, my boy, is to go right home to Stoneham and have a good rest." She chuckled. "You've made a few too many trips to the punch bowl, I fear."

With a laugh, he kissed her hand as she got out. "Say I'm forgiven and let me lunch with you tomorrow," he said, but his eyes were on Lelia.

The next day, Adam Jeffrey came for lunch and encountered his aunt's companion on the staircase.

"You're grieving, too," Lelia said in a shaky voice.

Very swiftly, he bent down and kissed her cheek, then hurried upstairs to Mrs. Cargill's room.

From then on he was a constant visitor either for lunch or dinner. They had tête-à-têtes in the captivating old-world garden at the back, made excursions when Mrs. Cargill was feeling well, and appeared together at all social events. And over all their activities shone the brilliant summer sun on the red Devon earth, bounded by lofty hedgerows and lush green pastures. Stone and thatched cottages flashed by as they sped laughing down narrow lanes, and Lelia remembered her childhood without sorrow because two dear friends now shared these pastoral beauties with her.

She slept, ate well, and was content, and if in the night stillness she wept for her dead love, mourning him as her beloved husband, that was her private grief. Tears vanished at daybreak under the many kindnesses lavished on her by this charming couple. Chores were but pleasures, and in those summer months Lelia regained a measure of joy, basking in their affection.

Yet there was not one moment in the day that she did not miss Jared Stoner. Quite simply, she felt that her heart had been torn out.

Autumn came and they donned stout clothes for outings. Card playing, puzzles, and games were taken up in the library. Adam worked his way through Mr. Thackeray, enthraling his listeners. As far as Lelia was concerned, it was an existence that could have gone on forever.

Sometime in late November, Mrs. Cargill addressed her nephew over a blancmange. "You're spending a lot of time here, my dear. People are beginning to talk," she added gently, fixing Lelia with a sweet smile.

"About us?" Adam asked lightly. "The three of us?"

"No, dear."

Inwardly, Lelia sighed. It must be quite serious for such a complaint to be made in front of her. And so their happy, carefree days must end. Selfishly, she had enjoyed it. Him.

Never one to waste time settling an issue, Adam cornered Lelia in the library after luncheon, and over her protests wrapped her in a cloak, and hustled her into his waiting carriage under the prying eyes of every busybody in the street. Off they went to Horwood, quite near Lelia's old home.

"Do you remember it?" he asked, as they dashed by the roadside farm and the thatched house with its incredible rock garden.

"How could one forget?" She smiled.

Passing the fifteenth-century church, the vehicle halted by an opening in the beech hedge, and they stepped onto a footpath, one of those ancient tracks which crisscross England. The air was cold but invigorating, the ground underfoot crisply firm; at times the path was so narrow that they could scarcely find a way through. On and on, until he pulled her into a vale sheltered from the wind and hidden from the main road by low hanging trees.

"Perhaps I should have taken you to Weare Giffard," he said somberly, "and shown you my riches." His smile was ironic. "Most people wax lyrical over Stoneham."

Lelia disengaged a twig from her skirt. "Why don't you just say what you want to say?"

A look of great sadness touched his face. "I think you're the only one who can make me forget . . . my mortality. My loneliness." Facing her, his eyes were despairing. "My darling Lelia, will you be my wife?"

Moved by his plea, she said sadly. "I have transgressed, Adam. Can you accept that in a wife?"

Now, he was himself again, the controller of his destiny. "I told you in Hunstanton, Lelia, that Jared was to blame—not you. That affair and the earlier one doesn't concern us. Except that it's made you what you are and I love you."

"You can have any woman you want. Why me?"

"I'm in love with you," he replied simply.

"Many people around here loathe the name of Savage," Lelia shot back, stalling for time. "No one came to my father's funeral. I might be bad luck to you."

Adam drew himself up proudly. "I am courted because of my wealth, not because of my charm. Most of these people coming to me—and the line is endless—want to sell me their goods or their daughters. Very few of them are my friends." Addressing the bowed golden head, he said softly, "I wrote to your mother after your father's death. The letter was returned after great delay marked 'addressee unknown.'"

"We were in London," she whispered. "Living in genteel poverty."

"I would have helped you, you know that." He came a step closer. "One look at you that day—and your mother knew it—" Chagrin edged his sudden laugh. "I wanted you. A child of fourteen, but ripe like Juliet with a woman's body. If I hadn't been leaving for Europe the next day, I would have become engaged to you. But I don't think I could have stood the two or three years' wait."

"Is the body so important?" Lelia asked very, very coldly.

"I will give you anything you desire if you become my

bride," he said in a low, ardent tone. "Jewels, which Victoria herself might envy."

"Do you want to sleep with me?" she asked, barely audible.

"And you shall be rich, richer than your mother ever dreamed. I am so rich, my darling."

Thinking of her dead love, Lelia said, "Love. I would rather have love."

"Not my wealth?" He stared at her in surprise.

"No."

"Me?" His look was incredulous. "Just me?"

"Yes." She felt a twinge of pain in her heart. God, why was she saying all these things? She wanted him as a friend, not lover, and above all not as a husband.

"Every woman pales beside you—"

Frightened, Lelia said, "I am still in mourning."

"Mourning? Who?" he cried angrily.

Their eyes met; his were smouldering. "Let the dead rest, Lelia."

No. No! she wanted to shout. But upon saying it, she would be forced to leave this beautiful haven. Forced to return to her nightmare existence in London. He'd made no offer to take her as a mistress—his intentions were honorable, and if she refused his proposal, Mrs. Cargill's door would be closed to her.

"Lelia! My sweet love!" Pulling her to him, he held her in a tight embrace, asking shyly, "Do you mind my being so grey?"

"No," she laughed, "it's as soft and silken as my little boy's," and she touched his hair in wonder.

"My love, my love," he murmured, his lips seeking hers in a gentle kiss, then harder and fiercer, forcing her lips apart until she cried out.

"You want me. I can feel it in your body . . . your eyes," he said in husky triumph.

Tears glittered on her lashes. "Adam, you must know something. I'm barren. I can't have any more children." That stopped him as she hoped it would. He turned abruptly and walked away up the path, deadly pale.

He was the kind of man who went to bed with a woman to make a child, Lelia thought. Not for pleasure.

"What happened?" His voice was distant.

"Puerperal fever after my baby was born," she muttered wretchedly. "The doctor told me I could never conceive—"

He interrupted tensely: "Did he say anything else?"

"A miracle was possible."

Strolling back down the path, he approached her with a smile. "Well, that's what we'll hope for," he said, taking her in his arms. "Please, sweetheart, marry me. I think we'll be happy."

Again, the sharp pain in her heart, but he touched her almost more than she could bear. A tear ran down her cheek.

"Yes, I know," he whispered, wiping away another tear. "I know you don't love me—"

"Adam!"

"It's true. You don't love me, but I'm confident that the time will come when you will, and I'm willing to take a gamble. Are you?"

Speechless, Lelia continued to stare at him.

"I have enough love for us both." He kissed her throat. "I need you . . . I want to look after you," he cried with fervor. "Say yes, please, darling. Please!"

Stroking his face, she saw his shining hope and remembered her small boy's hope and found them the same. What could be the harm?

Only her lips moved. "I will, Adam, I will."

Possessively, his mouth took hers, his hands fumbling at her breasts. And the happiest of men, he brought her back to Mrs. Cargill.

And why not snatch this chance of happiness? Lelia thought ruthlessly, watching him tell his aunt their news. I haven't really lied to him. I've simply told him nothing. Nothing. He knows so little of those terrible years in London, and really not a thing about his dear friend, Jared. Keep quiet and don't spoil it, she told herself, and we shall live happily ever after. Happily ever after.

Mrs. Cargill embraced Lelia joyously, and Adam kissed her, glowing with pleasure. No doubt it was cruel and wicked to practice such deception on a good, innocent man, but Lelia would not have destroyed that look for anything. Jared Stoner was dead. She was alive. In her own way, Lelia was very fond of Adam Jeffrey. What matter if she felt nothing at his touch? She was clever enough to deceive him. And they would live happily ever after. . . .

Their engagement was to be announced on Christmas Eve, with the marriage following a week later—New Year's Eve. Adam was ecstatic, not giving a damn what people thought about this highly unorthodox union, repeatedly assuring Lelia that she would make no enemies of his friends. He spent a fortune on her elaborate trousseau, and each day brought her a costly present, as thrilled as a child carrying a rare gift to its mother. A princess in a fairy tale could not have been more richly endowed. Only her new home—Stoneham—was not shown to her, for that was to be the climax. A surprise for her bridal day. During all these preparations, not once did Lelia stop and consider what she was doing.

On Christmas Eve, before the guests arrived at Mrs. Cargill's home in Westleigh, with his smiling aunt looking on, Adam Jeffrey, resplendent in evening dress, gave Lelia Savage the family jewels. In a beautiful rose-colored gown, heavily ornamented with seed pearls, its long train falling in a graceful line, Lelia stood rigid with terror hearing the words "family jewels." Adam, for once insensitive to her mood, kissed her tenderly and clasped an exquisite diamond choker around her neck. A small box was placed in her hands.

"Open it, dear," he urged.

Staring at the cluster of diamonds on the velvet, Lelia murmured, "What a lovely ring!"

"Put it on, darling," he cried with merry impatience.

She tried to slip it on her finger. It felt like a band of ice. Not even Jared had been that cold.

Her voice was almost inaudible. "I can't."

"Oh, you mean you can't get it on?" he laughed. "Here, sweet, let me help you," and he pushed it on. Sharp pain wrenched her heart.

Guests began arriving, and soon Lelia was swept up into a blaze of color, light, and merrymaking. A hundred candles twinkled on the tree; a group of musicians played throughout the evening; and mulled punch warmed everyone's veins. Adam Jeffrey, beaming in the most proprietary manner, never left Lelia's side. His hand constantly reached for hers, and when their engagement was announced, such joy shone on his face as to put her to shame.

Late that night, in her room at Mrs. Cargill's, Lelia fell on her knees in prayer. She prayed to the God she thought had forever deserted her during the horror of that week at Christine Marshall's, and whom she had found again at Richmond Hill. Acutely aware of the monstrous evil she had perpetrated—tampering with that foul stair and causing her darling's death—it appalled her now to be committing a second evil. She did not love Adam Jeffrey. She loved a dead man. Gazing at Adam's ring, Lelia saw only Jared's signet ring and felt how it burned when he had slipped it on to her finger.

If she told Adam the truth, and she was sorely tempted, where would it lead them? Her, to ruin—death, most likely. And Adam? To disgrace, perhaps, from which he might not recover. If she kept quiet, wasn't there a chance that she might come to love him? Of course . . . She prayed fervently for his happiness, and when she arose she felt confident. She could do it. . . .

Lelia's optimism lasted until her wedding day. Jared Stoner was barely eight months dead, and she was desecrating his memory. She was selling herself to a rich man for safety's sake. Admit it, she told herself. As her husband, Adam wasn't about to hand her over to the police should he learn her ghastly secret.

No longer did the ruby heart rest against her breast; it lay scorned among her fabulous new jewels. Today

she would wear the Jeffrey pearls . . . Trunks and valises crammed with an opulent wardrobe were scattered about the room. Two maids finished the packing while Lelia sat benumbed at the dressing table, fighting a growing oppression.

Jared. Jared, her heart raged. Why did you leave me alone? In God's name, why didn't you take me with you? *God, why didn't I wake up?*

A bottle of perfume fell onto the carpet. Lelia dismissed both maids in a tantrum then sank into utter despondency. Plans raced through her mind. How might she extricate herself from this miserable situation? Say anything, do anything—but get out of it. Tell him about London—that should do it. Tell him about Jared, her heart shrieked.

Knocking softly at the door and receiving no answer, Mrs. Cargill came in to check Lelia's progress. Finding her flushed and restless, distraught as a lost soul, she led her back from the open window to the dressing table.

"Lelia, dear, you just have a bad case of bridal jitters." Mrs. Cargill patted her lovingly. "I had them, too, before my marriage. There's not a woman alive who's not suffered them."

"Put on the ring," came Lelia's faint voice.

"Doesn't it fit, dear?" On it went without any trouble. "Yes, perfectly. Now listen to me, child. Adam is a good, affectionate man, and I dare say you can make him into a loving one. And that will warm your heart."

Ah, but I have no heart, Lelia thought wretchedly. It broke into a thousand pieces at the foot of that staircase. No one can mend that.

"A cup of tea will revive you, and then we'll get you dressed."

The alternative was too grim for her to face. Meekly, Lelia submitted. Under Mrs. Cargill's supervision, she was dressed in her bridal suit: a rust-colored velvet affair, over which was worn a three-quarter-length fur coat with hat to match. Once assembled, the wedding party drove off to the ancient church in Westleigh,

where so many of her Savage ancestors had celebrated their nuptials. Looking proud and happy, Adam held out an arm and Lelia smiled into his eyes.

She remembered very little of the ceremony. But when the vicar spoke the words: "If any man can show just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together," she distinctly heard someone call her name—*Lelia Savage*. So clear was the voice that she looked around the congregation. A pressure on her arm drew her back to Adam, who was smiling fondly.

Lelia stared at the clergyman in a daze, until she heard him say, "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder." A band tightened about her heart, and a voice said loudly in her ear, *Why did you betray me, my darling?*

She met Adam's eyes with a tear-filled look. They kissed and it was done. She was Mrs. Adam Cargill Jeffrey.

They were to honeymoon in Paris, taking the boat from Southampton the next evening. After a wedding dinner at Mrs. Cargill's, Adam brought Lelia to her new home—Stoneham. Twilight had long since fallen, but she saw enough of the park and the house to appreciate its splendor. Vast, glorious, and grand—it made Wickford look like a Restoration toy. Adam, eager and anxious, gave her no time to dwell on its treasures, but hurried her upstairs to their bedroom. It was a beautiful room, the color of ivory. On the woodwork, gilded designs trailed over the ceiling, doorways, and windows to make the room an enchanted bower.

Lelia was robed for the coming ordeal in costly lace and silk, her hair let down and brushed until it shone like spun gold. And she stood pale and silent, waiting. Adam came in from his dressing room, bearing a silver tray with a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Smiling at her, he opened the bottle and filled the crystal goblets.

"To my beautiful bride," he said, draining his glass. Lelia smiled and took a sip.

Giving her a hard kiss, he said tensely, "Now, I want

to see my wife." Steady, sure hands untied her negligee. Then, with painful slowness, he unbuttoned her nightdress, revealing her breasts. Always, she had watched their faces at this point. With this man she couldn't. Ashamed, Lelia looked away. The gown fell to the floor and she stood before him, naked. And as her husband stared at her for the first time, she wept under his rapt gaze, because now she knew what Jared Stoner had done for her. His love had made her chaste—an innocent—wiping away all those years of degradation. And with this man—her husband—she would be forced to turn prostitute again.

As Adam threw off his dressing gown, Lelia saw again the mask of lust. This time, unlike the dream, she couldn't escape him. He took her to their bridal bed and ravished her with low, frenzied cries. And Lelia, who had craved this act with Jared Stoner, now submitted to it with fear. Fortunately, Adam Jeffrey expected just such a reaction from his wife. It was proof that she was not a wanton bedfellow, but a good and virtuous woman.

A second coupling followed the first. This time he was more gentle and considerate. At the end he gave her a loving kiss, held her for a few brief moments, and then he turned over and went to sleep. All night long Lelia lay awake, staring into the darkness, aching for that fierce love which had set her on fire. Heartsick, she realized that she and Adam would never know such passion, and that she had no wish to feel it with him. A good whore can dissemble, and she would give him whatever he desired—coldness or warmth—to save his pride. That much she owed him. Not that he repulsed her; on the contrary, had they met before Jared, they might have been very happy. Now, his ardor meant nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Of the power of Jared Stoner's hold over her, Lelia was not yet fully appreciative. She only knew that she yearned for him with every fiber of her being, and wept for him on her wedding night. In that state, she had the first of the dreams.

Toward daybreak, Lelia fell asleep and found herself in an empty room. Oak paneling lined the walls, so that she knew she must be in an old house, but no light came from the windows and darkness pressed hard on the mullioned panes. An ancient house, Lelia thought, but where . . . where am I? Candles burned in wall sconces giving an eerie light. Starting a patient examination of the room, she carefully ran her fingers up and down the wainscoting, tracing a design of fruit, flowers, and acorns. She explored every inch of space. Reaching for the ornately carved oak fireplace, her hands crawled along the mantle to the paneling beyond. A soft click and the panel flew open, disclosing a secret passage. Frightened by the darkness, she stretched out a loving hand, calling: *Jared!* Then more loudly: *Jared!* But the passage was empty and she backed away from it in anguish, her heart sinking. His voice rang in her ears as she awoke. *Why did you betray me, Lelia Savage?* And again: *Why did you betray me?*

Luckily, Adam had heard nothing. At any rate, they had an amiable breakfast, and then because of a last-minute business crisis, headed for London instead of Southampton. Adam plunged into City intrigue, while Lelia languished amid the splendors of Claridge's until his return. As they were catching the steamer from Dover the next day, a proud Adam, impatient to show off his new bride, insisted on dining in the restaurant. The inevitable happened.

"Lelia, darling! Where have you been hiding?" leered a man at her elbow, sizing up her new "lover." "You left Michael Houghton absolutely desolate."

"Charles, you were always such a card." Withdrawing her hand from his moist lips, she said coldly, "I'd like you to meet my husband, Adam Jeffrey. This is Dr. Morris, darling."

Pleasantries were exchanged between the two men while Lelia sipped her wine in fury.

Watching the interloper amble away, Adam turned to her with a quizzical look. "Who was that?"

"A bore," she drawled, reaching for his hand. "Let's go upstairs."

Thoroughly alarmed by that odious encounter, she responded to Adam's caresses with more warmth than usual. The incident forgotten, he took her eagerly, afterward falling asleep and leaving her alone to face the perils of the night. And again came the dream.

Round and round, Lelia walked in that damnable room. Now, of course, she knew where she was. Back at Richmond Hill. But this time she couldn't open the panel. Desperately, she pounded on the walls, screaming for Jared to open it. Screaming for her love. . . .

She awoke in cold fright. Beside her Adam slept peacefully. Sick with apprehension, Lelia spent the rest of the night sitting up in a chair, huddled in a comforter against the winter chill.

Why did you betray me? Why did you betray me? rang his voice in her brain. *Why did you betray me?*

17.



PARIS was good to them. Adam and Lelia shared a mutual delight in the arts, and wandered entranced from one marvel to another in that beautiful city. Exquisite objets d'art were purchased for Stoneham, and Lelia's wardrobe bulged with costly Parisian gowns. Those three months would turn out to be the high point of their marriage. Away from England, business and personal worries seemed unimportant, and they took pleasure in one another's company. Lelia began to think her marriage a success, and Adam the kindest of men.

Honeymoons end. On the returning steamer, she

realized that not once had she been plagued by those disturbing dreams. It was the beginning of April. Almost a year since Jared Stoner's death. A profound melancholy seized her as they stood on the deck by the railing.

"Do you still think of him?" she boldly asked.

Adam, whose intuition was very sharp, looked at her. "Jared?"

"Yes."

He hesitated. "I think of him constantly."

"It's been a year." Her voice shook. "Don't you think we should visit his grave?"

Studying her with reflective eyes, Adam demurred. "I think not. Leave the dead in peace, Lelia. I do," he said, smiling.

Back they journeyed to Devon and Stoneham. Though everyone thought it a magnificent house, Lelia didn't like it. It was too perfect, too much the museum. A gifted imitator of Nicholas Hawksmoor had created this fabulous baroque concoction in the classical style in the eighteenth century. It was built of creamy stone, with giant Corinthian pilasters, tall windows reaching to the ceilings, a rusticated base, and a balustrade on the flattened roof. If seen from faraway, it looked quite remarkable, but up close she found its beauty frozen. The formal garden with ornamental pond, yew hedges, and park stretching away in the distance had an unpleasant rigidity. Even the trees were pruned too meticulously. If Adam disliked their growth, he had the offending limbs cut down. Nothing was left to chance. And the rarefied atmosphere of the interior was stifling. Each room formed a brilliant setting for the superb collection of furnishings and antiques, many of which were under glass. It intimidated her. Once she rearranged a few chairs, and Adam became quite wild.

"It belongs that way. Leave it alone, Lelia. Each has its place."

"And am I part of your collection, too?" she asked, hurt by his anger.

"I don't find that amusing, my dear." His tone was

icy. "And don't wear pearls with that gown. Wear the rubies."

Of course, he was right. Always right. Rubies went with the dress. His taste was impeccable. And Lelia chalked up one more petty failure, feeling no more than a mannequin to him. Newlyweds were expected to avoid society for some months, so she was trapped in lonely boredom while Adam went once a week to Tavistock, or made longer trips to London. Silently, she and the house endured one another, each resentful. Nor could those brief moments of furtive intimacy when he was resident make up for the arid waste of the days.

Is it any wonder that the dreams took over with such morbid intensity? Nightly, they lay in wait for her.

Now the empty room had furniture. Everything which had been in her room at Richmond Hill—clothes, books, brushes, scent bottles—was there. All that was needed was the lord and master. Night after night, she begged him to come, pleaded with him. And then one night she sobbed, *I never meant to kill you. Dear God, I never meant that to happen! It was an accident. You must believe me. How could I betray you when I love you so?*

That did it. The panel swung open and Jared Stoner stood before Lelia as vengeful as he had been the day he attacked her in his study. So handsome, he took her breath away. She stood transfixed. Wanting him so badly she thought her heart would break.

Oh, my darling! It was an accident. I swear—an accident.

Approaching her swiftly, he began to shake her. He shook her so hard, she cried out in pain and woke up—to find Adam staring at her curiously.

"Do you always have such bad dreams, Lelia?"

Unable to face him, she rose from the satin sheets and fetched her peignoir. "Now and then," she muttered. "I told you I have insomnia."

"But these are dreams, my dear," he remarked pointedly. "What's troubling you?"

"Nothing really. Sometimes I dream about my little boy."

He looked worried and she wondered how much he had really heard.

Night after night, Lelia returned to that ghostly room to act out the same dream of longing. Each time, finding herself alone, she implored Jared to appear. Finally, when the agony reached an unbearable pitch, he would step out from the passage. Gradually, she came to realize that the rage directed at her was not at his death, but at what he considered a far greater betrayal—her marriage to his best friend.

I never meant to marry him, Jared. I wanted to die. Why didn't you take me with you?

At that his face softened. His voice became gentle. *I tried taking you, Lelia, didn't you know that? In Hunstanton. But they found you. Another few minutes and you would have been dead. Now, you've betrayed our love.*

No . . . She moaned. No! I've not played you false. Beseeching him, she wept. Touch me, Jared, and see if I've betrayed you.

A look of passion flowed between them, but still he denied her.

Damn you, Jared Stoner! I love you with all my heart and soul. Lelia cried in agony. You caught me as a child, and made me love you as a woman. Trust me, my darling. As she reached for him, he vanished, and she awoke with a low cry of despair.

Adam was watching her in concern. "This must stop, Lelia."

Trying to appear nonchalant, she crawled out of bed and flung herself on a chair. "I'll gladly sleep in another bedroom if that will give you more rest."

"It's not me I'm worrying about," he said patiently. "It's you. These dreams are tearing you apart."

"Aren't you being a bit melodramatic?"

"I think not. I'm going to take you to the doctor."

"It's not a doctor I need, it's something to do,

Adam," Lelia burst out vehemently. "I have nothing to do in this beautiful house of yours."

"If only you were pregnant," he sighed, eyeing her wistfully. "You're not, by any chance, are you?"

She shook her head in misery.

"Pity. A babe takes a woman's mind off her troubles." With a lazy stretch, he added, "All I want is for you to be my beautiful wife. You don't need to do anything."

"I'm not a piece of bric-a-brac that you can stick on a shelf and forget—" And with that she dissolved in tears.

"Come here." Patting the bed, he made her sit beside him like a naughty dog. "I insist that you visit my doctor and get a sleeping potion. My dear girl needs her rest." Tenderly embracing her, he whispered, "One or two rooms at Stoneham need a little work—new wallpaper, fabrics—that sort of thing. And you must start studying my collections, so that when we begin to entertain in June you'll be familiar with them. Will that keep you busy?" He smiled.

It was a big concession. None of his rooms needed redoing. That was Adam's way of making peace, and it gave Lelia hope for the future. Agreeing happily, she obtained a sedative, and persuaded Mrs. Cargill to join her in the redecorating project. Many pleasant hours were spent poring over wallpaper books and fabric swatches. So enthralled was she with the work's progress, that she found herself missing Adam less on his business jaunts. And at night she slept well, untroubled by dreams, thanks to the medication.

By June, the interior decoration was finished, and Lelia was hard at work memorizing catalogues of his various collections. It was not a chore, but a delight, to learn the provenance and history of these treasures. She had access to every room in the house—except one. It was a small room off the library, which Adam called his cabinet. One which wouldn't interest her, he said.

An anonymous note drove her to find out its secret. Adam was inspecting his mines in Tavistock, returning

later in the day, so Lelia opened the mail. With all her experience, how could she have been so naïve? she wondered, reading the scrawl a dozen times. That kind of thing she would have expected from Jared, but not Adam—not her nice, genteel husband.

Your husband sleeps with a prostitute in Tavistock. Why don't you look in his cabinet?

Trusting Lelia—or testing her, perhaps—Adam had shown his wife where he kept the key, waving it before her eyes, then depositing it in his jewel case. Like Bluebeard's wife, she now took that key and walked into despair.

A small room, with shutters over the windows, it contained a couch, a chair, a table, bottles of liquor, and many shelves holding not only an extensive library of pornography, but a number of obscene objets d'art—Greek and Roman vases, bronzes, statues . . . Despite her anguish, Lelia had to smile. This must be her retribution for trying to escape the past. But she wept, too, seeing her marriage unravel.

Adam found her there in the late afternoon, sitting like a wraith in the dying sun. His look of fury dissipated at sight of the letter. Snatching it from her hand, he studied the contents.

"Well, is it true?" she asked dully.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Yes."

"I'm your wife, Adam. Why don't you come to me? Why don't you—" Hesitating, Lelia searched for the right word, her voice trembling. "Use me?"

"Damn it, Lelia! There are things that happen between a man and a woman, which do not occur between a man and his wife. I will not subject my wife to such things."

"Do you visit this person in a brothel, or is she your mistress?"

For the first time, he looked ashamed. "My mistress . . . has been for years. For God's sake!" he exploded. "I'm human. I have a normal man's desires!"

Lelia watched him through blurred eyes. "Any children?"

"No." At her frigid look, he shouted, "You are my wife. I love you. I will not use you like that." He jerked her to her feet. "Despite your affairs, my dear, you have no idea what I'm talking about." Her continued silence infuriated him. "Dear God, Jared had a pack of whores!"

Forgetting herself, she cried, "Ah, but he wasn't in love——"

"If you could just get pregnant," he said very bitterly. "It would make all the difference, Lelia."

Cut to the quick, she headed for the door. "You knew the chances when you married me." Hesitating, she fixed him with a sideways glance. "Will you still be seeing her?"

He waved the letter at her. "This is punishment enough for invading my privacy." Strain etched his face. "Of course, I'll see her. It has nothing to do with us, my dear. Many husbands keep a mistress. Your father was a habitu  of brothels . . ."

Not answering him, Lelia left in tears. Adam bedded her that night, a bit drunk—demanding his marital rights as if nothing were wrong. Hiding her deep hurt, she welcomed him with chaste restraint. And when he slept, she returned to the world of her dreams with a vengeance. The medication had kept her from dreaming; now she neglected to take it and felt no compunction about resuming that spectral life. Realizing the acute danger of speaking aloud, she solved the problem with astonishing ease.

When next Lelia found herself in that room, she simply held out her arms to Jared Stoner, without saying a word, and he came to her immediately. It was all he had been waiting for.

You are mine, all mine, he whispered, and then his mouth bent to hers in a fiery kiss. Picking her up in his arms with an exultant smile, he carried Lelia over to the bed and made passionate love to her. Afterward, they fell asleep in each other's arms. Thus did she

find peace with her darling, keeping Adam unaware because she no longer talked in her sleep. Enraptured with their happiness, she and Jared went on like this for months. Jared's only angry outbursts occurred when Adam touched her. Then a few caresses or an ardent kiss usually soothed her dead lover. And so she continued to lead her double life.

In the summer, visitors came from Devon, Cornwall, and London. Adam loved to entertain, and Lelia discovered that she, too, enjoyed it in such a grand setting. His guests found her a beautiful hostess, which was exactly what Adam wanted. Outwardly, they were a contented couple, in love. The mistress in Tavistock was never discussed again, and they continued to hope for a child. Lelia responded to his advances with affection, and if sometimes she felt guilty that the great love of her life was giving her such joy, she concealed it. Occasionally, she found Adam watching her with a perplexed expression. Perhaps he suspected all was not well, that not even he was capable of making her look so radiant. If so, he dismissed the worry. And she was happy—why question it? Wasn't her husband a cheat, too?

All summer Lelia lived in a dream of ecstasy, but in her delight she became careless. She was too intoxicated, too confident of being able to manage her complex world. Jared's presence had grown so strong within her that in the daytime she could feel him like a physical force, enveloping her. Night was no longer enough. She craved him in daylight, pressing hard against her body, his mouth hot and demanding. One day in the formal garden, sitting on a bench near the pond, she summoned him, then leaned back in rapture as their bodies met urgently.

Adam caught her.

"Lelia, are you all right?" he asked curiously.

Opening her eyes in a daze, she stared at her husband. "Yes, of course," she said crisply. "Just a day-dream."

"We have guests coming. It's time you dressed."

That night in the dream, Jared was furious with her. Lelia's loving gestures met with imprecations.

Damn you, Lelia, I've been too much in love with you to see properly, but now we're going to settle it. Give him up!

She looked bewildered.

*You know damn well what I'm talking about. My best friend—*He sneered. *Your husband. Give him up!*

She shook her head.

Do you remember what I once told you? That if you ever lay with another man, I would curse you until the day you died?

Weakly, she nodded.

Standing before her, tall and proud, his eyes flashed dangerously. *Well, you've broken your trust with me. You betrayed our love and I curse you with all my heart.*

No! She cried out.

You will not have a moment's peace until you die.

She was sobbing. *Jared, I love only you. Don't turn from me, my darling. I can't bear life without you. I don't love Adam. Only you, my wild heart.* Catching him before he reached the secret panel, she forced him to look at her. *Don't you know I want you so much that I can't wait for the nights? Jared, don't leave me. You'll kill me if you go.*

He looked thoughtful. *Maybe that's what I should do,* he said quietly and stepped into the passageway.

Frantically, Lelia beat on the panel until her fingers bled. Adam woke her up. He was in his dressing gown, which surprised her.

"You've been weeping," he said flatly. "Here." And he gave his wife a handkerchief.

Wiping her tear-streaked face, Lelia sank against the pillows, exhausted.

"I want to ask you something, Lelia." His voice sounded hollow.

Her eyes were wary. "What?"

"You and Jared—"

Again, she felt the sharp stab in her heart. "It ended when he said it did."

He seemed not to have heard. "Once I was with Jared, not too many months before he died, and I saw the most peculiar look on his face."

"Oh?"

"Yes, he was watching you, and I thought it most strange that he would stare at you in so intimate a manner. I felt embarrassed to be present."

"Intimate?" Lelia questioned faintly.

"I describe it as such. A look of possession. A man coveting a rare jewel has the same look on his face, or for that matter—" He hesitated. "—A man making love to a woman." At her dismayed gasp, he said, "Lelia, I must know something—"

"What?"

"Jared and you . . . He said he took up with another woman after your affair. My God, was he lying? Was it still you?"

She met his agonized glance with remarkable control. "I told you, Adam, it ended when he said it did."

For a long time he stared at his wife with haunted eyes. "Then why do you continue to weep for him? Every night?"

Flinging her head back defiantly, she said, "Why would I weep for a man who raped me?"

Luckily, he dropped the matter, knowing, perhaps, that had he pursued it, his marriage might have ended. Instead, he sat beside her, stroking the golden hair. "You must go to the doctor again, Lelia, and get something stronger."

"Yes, of course," she agreed with a touch of irony, thinking about the chloral bottle, smashed when she discovered his infidelity.

Adam left abruptly for London—urgent business demanding a week's stay. But Lelia knew better. His strained behavior, furtive air, and unhappiness could not deceive her. He was going to have her investigated. Beside herself with anxiety, Lelia secluded herself at

Stoneham, not wanting to hurt him—wishing to protect him in any way possible. Despite their differences, Adam Jeffrey meant a great deal to her.

Lelia returned each night to that enchanted room and waited in vain for Jared Stoner. Rage and agony tore her apart. How could she have been so foolish as to lose him? And she didn't know how to get him back. Tears, entreaties—nothing worked.

God damn it! Lelia cried savagely. *Have you condemned me to this room for all eternity?* A mocking silence greeted this outburst, and she collapsed in utter despondency.

Adam returned home unexpectedly, looking pale and ill. Because he couldn't look her in the eye and avoided her whenever possible, Lelia knew that he'd learned something. His complaints of not feeling well were followed by a move from their bedroom into another, and tension dogged all their meals. Once Lelia accidentally touched him, and he pulled away as if repelled. To their guests, they still appeared a devoted couple, but the deception took a great toll.

Finally, in sheer desperation, Lelia was driven to consult Dr. Whicher because the dreams were pushing her to the verge of madness. After an examination in his home at Weare Giffard, he pronounced her fit. Later, in a consulting room overlooking the Torridge River, she sought his help. Bad dreams were plaguing her.

"What sort of dreams?"

"A recurrent dream which haunts me," Lelia mumbled.

An eyebrow shot up. "Is anything troubling you, Mrs. Jeffrey? What do you think is causing this?"

An alien voice spoke: "Bad conscience."

Dr. Whicher looked startled. "Well, I can give you another sleeping prescription, Mrs. Jeffrey, but perhaps you need something else—a clergyman."

Lelia flinched, said nothing, and held out a gloved hand for the chloral hydrate prescription. Later, waiting for it to be filled at the chemist, she thought to herself, It's worth a try, why not? See what he says.

The coachman dropped her in Clovelly with instructions to return at four o'clock. As he drove off, Lelia lowered her veil and walked down the dark tunnel of old yews to the fifteenth-century church. There was an hour's wait until the Anglican confessional opened, and she sat in a pew, staring vacantly at stained glass designs and ancient statues, wondering with a sick heart what this man of God would say to her, fearing his words.

At last she went in and told her story in a flat voice, carefully disguising certain aspects so that he would be unable to identify any names or places. His answer, when it came, was predictable.

"My child, the only way you will know peace is to go to the police and confess your crime—this murder. Only by confession can you find salvation."

"Is there no other way?" she asked in terror.

"No other way," he intoned, and Lelia fled from him, out a side door and into the churchyard, tripping over a stone in her hurry to escape. Grabbing another headstone to steady her progress, she gave it an angry wrench. She didn't even know where Jared Stoner was buried. Could her darling see Richmond Hill from where he lay?

Clovelly's timeless beauty today seemed remote and ineffectual; its steep cobbled street, a treacherous hazard. Sick with love, riddled with despair, Lelia wandered past fishing and pleasure boats at the harbor's edge. She considered her alternative. Suicide. It would be less painful than going to the police, but equally damaging to Adam's reputation. What she needed was a prescription for laudanum. She must go to Whicher and say the chloral was ineffective. The chimes of the clock interrupted that line of thought. Another day would come. . . .

Back at Stoneham, Lelia crept into her bedroom and sank weeping onto a chair. As the spasm of grief subsided, she became aware that someone else was in the darkened room. Adam.

With a stifled groan, he knelt beside her, burying

his head in her lap. "Lelia . . . Lelia! Forgive me, my sweet."

"Why should I forgive you?" she sobbed. "You're not the one to be forgiven." He caught his wife in his arms and held her tightly. "Oh, God, what am I going to do?" Lelia moaned.

Adam studied her tear-stained face sadly, then touched it, his thoughts faraway. Kissing the delicate cheek, he said slowly, "I think what we need is little William."

"Little William!" She laughed in spite of her heart-ache. "Is he an ancient?"

"No," he smiled. "Little William is just that. You'll see."

Adam's uplifted spirits were catching, and Lelia waited in fascinated suspense for their mysterious visitor's arrival. Mrs. Cargill came to Stoneham to join Adam in a whirlwind of excited preparations. Frequent discussions took place amid laughter, and the unknown's suite was a hub of industry. Lelia wasn't consulted—it was to be a surprise, which bothered her not a jot. A good night's sedated sleep had rendered her most amiable.

The happiness of these two people, of whom she was very fond, touched Lelia immensely, and when the carriage pulled up to the entrance front and the small valise was handed down, followed by an even smaller boy, she wept, not with pain—because he looked so much like her lost little boy—but with joy because she knew he would draw them together.

Adam, standing by Lelia's side, gripped her hand hard when the child alighted and he felt her poignant astonishment. "The best tonic I know, Lelia," he said, embracing her.

William came running up the steps. "Uncle Adam!" he called merrily, and was bounced high into the air like a rubber ball.

"I want you to meet your Aunt Lelia," said Adam proudly, thrusting a small hand into his wife's. Leaping to the ground, the newcomer clutched her about the

legs. Lelia gathered him to her breast with a silent prayer that he might save her marriage.

And William did save them for many weeks. One look at his cheery, bright face perked up the whole day or dispelled a grumpy mood. He and Lelia became fast friends: indeed, she could hardly relinquish him to his governess. Adam couldn't have been more pleased. This was his only sister's child, the youngest of seven. Alas, she had married a delightful but impecunious curate, who could barely make ends meet from his small living in Kent. If they wanted to adopt the boy, Adam saw no impediment.

Lelia liked the idea. William reminded her of what David might have been like at five years of age, but instead of causing her anguish it merely laid his ghost to rest.

Adam slept with her again, and they began rebuilding a shaky new trust. But every month came the painful acknowledgment that she wasn't pregnant, and the fearful disappointment on his face when he learned the truth. Still, he was tender and considerate until that mid-November day when their lives were shattered.

Lelia was at his side when it came—a thick manila envelope from London. One look at his white, strained face and she knew what it contained—a file on her activities. That night, he did not appear for dinner and absented himself from her bed. A terse note came the next day. She was to have no communication with him, and was forbidden to see William unless absolutely necessary. Only illness and Christmas would grant her a reprieve.

Once during those sorrowful weeks, Lelia met Adam on the marble staircase. "I beg of you, let me see the boy, please!" she cried.

Seldom had she seen such despair in a man's eyes. "I trusted you, Lelia. God, how you deceived me!" he said vehemently. "You're not fit to go near that child."

William was fed a cock-and-bull story that his aunt was ailing and not to be disturbed, so that on the

rare occasions when Lelia glanced fearfully into those embarrassed little eyes, filled with apprehension, he shied away from her. She and Adam dined together only when society demanded it. Lelia spent that long, lonely period confined to her suite in a torpor of misery. Obviously, he knew everything. Why then didn't he seek a separation—a divorce? What was he waiting for?

Early in December, on one of those frosty nights brilliant with moonlight, Lelia sat by the window unable to sleep. She had been drugging herself on chloral for weeks because she couldn't face the desolation of her dream without Jared. On this exquisite night, a full moon shone down over the formal garden, the ornamental pond, and the great stretch of park. In the distance stood one of those elaborate temples, which had been a favorite conceit of eccentric ancestors. This one, like the house, had been constructed in stone early in the eighteenth century, and was known as The Temple of the Moon and the Stars, because carefully placed windows allowed one to view the moon in all its phases, and other windows in the dome exposed every star. One night, in the young days of their marriage, Adam had introduced her to its glories, and they had made love under a burst of stars.

Now, alone in her cold bedroom, Lelia saw the temple's windows aflame against the night sky, and wondered if he had taken some other woman there. She opened the window and sounds of laughter floated up to her ears.

Flinging a cashmere cloak over her robe, she slipped out of the house by way of the terrace leading into the garden, then followed a graveled path across the park to the temple. Shouts of raucous laughter grew louder at her approach. The whole place was ablaze with lights. Creeping up the stone steps, past guardian nymph statues, Lelia hastened under the portico and peered in at a window. One entered the building by way of a vestibule, then passed through a pair of gigantic double

doors into the solitary room, a huge rectangular chamber surmounted by a large dome. Overlooking this room was a small, enclosed, windowed balcony. Anyone desiring privacy might sit in seclusion and watch the goings-on below.

Sick with curiosity and dread, Lelia let herself into the vestibule and ran up the iron spiral staircase to the balcony, hoping to find it deserted. Luck was with her. Everyone had gathered in the main room. There was not a woman in sight. The place was packed with men she recognized from the nearby villages. They were drinking, smoking, placing wagers, laughing boisterously; and in the midst of this incredible din was her husband, smoking a cigar, a brandy bottle in his hand, strolling from group to group, looking flushed and disheveled.

In the center of the floor a wooden enclosure, six feet across, had been erected. One look and she knew they were gathered to see a once-popular pastime for the poor which had been outlawed in London for a number of years. As a barmaid in Whitechapel, she'd heard men describe these slaughters, and now her husband was about to indulge a lord's fancy.

Out came an uncouth man with scarred arms and few teeth. He staggered as if very drunk, but the weight of the rusty iron cage in his arms may have accounted for his ungainliness. Too appalled to move, Lelia leaned against the glass and watched as he dipped his arms into a writhing mass of rats and pulled them out one by one to the cheers of his audience, tossing them into the improvised pit. Nearby, lolled a brutish lout holding a frothing terrier on a leash. The sight and smell of the rats was driving the animal berserk. Even through the glass she could hear his wild barking. Scarred-arms tossed in his last rat, and her gentle husband gave the signal for the dog to be let in.

The spectators—some of the most important men in the county—pressed about the pit with jeering cries and catcalls, not one of them obscuring Lelia's splendid view of the butchery. In a rain of blood, that wretched

terrier killed eighty rats in five minutes. "A new champion!" shouted her husband. And she turned from him as from a monster.

But Adam Jeffrey came after his wife—by some intuition looking up to catch sight of her shocked face in the gallery. He pursued Lelia like a vengeful fury out of the defiled temple, across the damp lawn, through the garden and into Stoneham. Two steps at a time, he raced up the marble staircase to their suite, beating down the locked door of her sitting room to gain entrance. As the beautifully painted wood splintered, Lelia retreated to the bedroom, no longer caring what he did to her.

"You're very curious, Lelia." Breathing heavily, he leaned against the doorjamb. "It's one of the first things which attracted me to you. My curious bride." And he laughed unpleasantly. "Well, did you enjoy it, love? I made a lot of money tonight. Would you like to earn some?" An edge to his voice made her glance up. "Not every man's fortunate enough to have a harlot for a wife. Just think, you save me a trip to Tavistock. No more playing the lady, eh?"

"I think you're a bit drunk, Adam," Lelia said coolly. "You must have cut yourself. There's blood on your shirt."

He flicked a bored hand at the fine cambric. "Oh, that always happens at these affairs. Amazing how much the little bloaters hold!" At her look of disgust, he sneered. "Come now, what's your price? I'm in the mood for more entertainment. I hear you used to get ten to twenty pounds a night. I don't know if you're worth twenty pounds now, Lelia. The bloom of youth has faded. Still, you're remarkably beautiful. How much?"

"My God, you've gone crazy!"

"Either you take me or I'll turn you over to some of my friends—" With a menacing air, he sauntered over to the bed where she was sitting.

"I'm your wife," Lelia reminded him. "They wouldn't touch me."

"Oh, yes, they would." His eyes narrowed. "They're all very drunk, and I'd make certain no one saw your face. Just that magnificent body." He plucked off her cloak.

She tried to get up, but he held her down. "Adam, please, I'll give you a divorce—anything you want. Just let me go."

"Oh, no." He leaned over her, reeking of smoke and brandy. "I told you I have need of a whore, and I want your services now. Are you worth twenty pounds?" Untying Lelia's robe, he ripped the exquisite silk night-dress into shreds. Studying her nakedness with a cold, professional eye, he said roughly, "Yes, you're still worth it." A rivulet of gold coins spilled onto the bedside table, and then he gagged and raped her.

When at last it was over and the silken gag removed, Adam collapsed by her side, weeping, endlessly calling her name like a soul in torment. Sickened by his violence, this desperate anguish hurt more than his brutality. Swallowing her repugnance, Lelia cradled him in her arms until he fell heavily asleep. Amazingly, she, too, must have slept because when she awoke in the grey dawn, she was alone in that massive bed.

Two things kept Lelia from leaving Adam that morning. A man does not weep in a woman's arms if he feels nothing for her; and William came down with a mysterious fever. Although denied admittance to the sick room, Lelia couldn't walk out on him at this stage. For a week, the poor child was critically ill. Mercifully, his temperature finally dropped, but another seven days followed before he could set foot out of bed. Christmas week was approaching, and Lelia had no heart to spoil his and Mrs. Cargill's holiday. Much as she feared Adam, she blamed herself even more for ruining his life, and despair made her prolong the departure. So she and Adam, on a round of parties, endured the farce of pretending that they were a happily married couple. If these days were painful—and she saw her own torment reflected in Adam's sad, grim face—the New Year's Eve celebration of their first

wedding anniversary at his aunt's house was excruciating. For the first time in her life, Lelia drank too much champagne—to forget the awful silence between them on that long carriage drive. As soon as the New Year was underway, she would go, Lelia promised herself, but by then she was ill with what she suspected was a touch of William's malady. No fever, however, just an abnormal fatigue and little interest in food. By mid-January, feeling so poorly, she went to consult Dr. Whicher.

In a thoughtful state, Lelia drove back from Weare Giffard, mulling over his findings. When the carriage left her at the front entrance, she headed for the formal garden, not wishing to step inside that suffocating house. A chill wind blew, but it was a lovely, cloudless day and she sank down onto one of the stone benches gracing the side of the pond. She hadn't seen Adam in days. He was probably in Tavistock or Exeter. The water rippled across the pond, disturbing the reflection of encircling trees. Like Stoneham, it was immaculately kept. Not a leaf fell but a gardener stood ready to scoop it out. Remembering her family's untidy moat at Wickford with its mass of water lilies, Lelia winced.

I'm punished enough, Jared, she cried to her aching heart. Can't you forgive me for that terrible accident? And come to me again? I love you. I love you. Why do you make me wait so long, my love?

Despite the cold, the sun beat down on her, and Lelia took off her hat and sealskin coat, sitting exposed to the elements in a wool dress.

"What the devil are you trying to do? Catch pneumonia?"

She looked up in astonishment, blinking at her husband in the sunlight. Adam had seen her from the house. Stupid of her. She ought to have slipped into one of the yew hedge enclosures.

"What in God's name is the matter with you, Lelia? Have you lost your tongue?" he shouted irritably, hurrying toward the bench.

"I'm pregnant," she said in a low voice.

"You're what?"

"I'm going to have your child."

"When?" He stared at his wife, disbelieving.

"About seven months."

His voice dripped acid. "Who have you been sleeping with? One of my servants? Not with me, I warrant."

"It happened the night of the rat-match. You paid twenty pounds for me. Twenty pounds for a baby," she added bleakly.

Shock and dismay filled his eyes, but only for a moment. Ever the practical man, he spoke quietly, "Not that many children are conceived in love, Lelia. Was your son?" She shook her head. "Well, I wasn't a love child either. It was a marriage of convenience. Despite all that's happened—" He faltered, moved in spite of himself. "I want you to know that I love you."

"Leave me alone, Adam," Lelia cried, breaking into tears. "I can't stand any more of your cruelties."

"I love you, Lelia. I always have," he murmured fervidly. He wrapped her in his arms, his kiss more ardent than any yet bestowed. "I'll make it up to you, darling. I swear it." Frantic kisses covered her face. "My love . . . my beautiful darling! We must get you inside. You're much too pale, sweet love." Bundling her in the fur coat, he tenderly helped her inside, pressing her head to his shoulder. No staircase would she climb. With possessive pride, he carried her upstairs to their bedroom.

"Now, you must get plenty of rest, darling."

In the privacy of their suite, he breathed, "Lelia, I'm so happy. So happy."

"How much have you learned about me?" Lelia questioned, wondering how he could love a whore's child.

He smiled, his eyes confident, meeting hers. "It's not important. Not any more. It's the baby we need to think of now." Kneeling beside her, he laid his head against her abdomen.

Clearly, he knew it all, Lelia thought sadly, and was

staking all their future happiness on the baby's existence. In other words, she was to be forgiven for the child's sake. It was too great a responsibility.

"You know I may not be able to bring this child to full term?"

He looked tense. "What does Whicher say?"

"That I'm healthy."

"Then it's in God's hands, Lelia," he murmured, kissing her breasts.

Gingerly, she cradled his head. He would not willingly touch her now vulnerable body, lest he hurt her. No pregnancy would have stood in the way of Jared Stoner's ardor. And suddenly, like a small thing burrowing, she felt the pain in her heart, growing slowly but surely, until its grip made Lelia remember Hunstanton and what she might have lost there. Jared's child. Tears ran down her cheeks.

"Darling, you must go to bed and not weep. This is such a happy day." And Adam undressed and put her to bed, lovingly.

Lelia touched his face. "May I see William again?"

"Of course, my beautiful darling. Now you must rest for the baby's sake."

"For the baby's sake," her voice echoed until she slept.

She came to her old room at Richmond Hill, the dream she hadn't dreamed in months. Again, Lelia was alone in that desolate chamber until a click in her ears alerted her to the panel's opening. She waited, but he didn't come. And so, in trepidation, she went to him, her heart wildly beating, feeling her way in the dark with her fingertips. At length, she came to his room, pitch-black, except for a candle's faint glimmer. Jared Stoner lay on the bed, asleep. A smile on his face. Lelia touched his head and it rolled back, disclosing the broken neck. Stifling a scream, she gathered him in her arms and rocked him against her breast.

Speak to me, darling. Please, my love, she crooned. So many months have gone by and I've not seen you.

She caressed his beautiful face with wondering fingers.
Darling, speak . . .

The dark eyes opened. *Do you love me, Lelia?*

*With all my heart and soul. You know that, Jared.
How often must I prove it?*

You're bearing another man's child, he accused.

Angrily, she replied, *I'm married to him. Isn't it to be expected?*

Not from the woman who loves me. His voice was very cold.

What do you want me to do? she asked, shaken.

In reply, he took Lelia in his arms and made violent love to her. And when at length she raised her head in a daze of passion, he was smiling.

You know what to do.

No, please!

Only one child was awaiting you—mine.

Her bitter, frightened protests were cut short by a feverish kiss. *How long are you going to make me wait, darling?*

He wants the baby. I can't deny him this.

I love you, Lelia. Can you deny yourself that? How long must you keep me waiting?

Why didn't you take me then? she cried, grief-stricken. *Why do you torture me like this?*

To punish you, my darling, he whispered, as someone shook her awake.

It was Adam, who held Lelia a moment, without reproaching her for what he may have heard, who gave her a sleeping draught and sat by her until she slipped into oblivion.

The baby grew while Lelia warred nightly with her dead love to protect it.

No! Jared shouted violently. *No child. A child will separate us, and you belong to me and to no one else.* Holding out his arms, he wooed her with passionate vigor. *Come here, my sweet wife . . .*

And Lelia came. Many was the time she lay rapt in his strong arms. A demon lover, she thought, whose kisses she drank.

And the child continued to grow.

By March, Lelia was in her third month, feeling astonishingly well, all signs of fatigue and queasiness gone. Bored with being a semi-invalid, she resumed a moderately active life: supervising the redecoration of the nurseries, spending much time with William, and taking long walks in the park. Delighted with her progress, Adam encouraged her interests with enthusiasm.

One morning, Lelia awoke with an urge to go to Tintagel. A pregnant woman's silly whim, Adam called it, laughing; but it became her *idée fixe*. Eventually, she forced him to consult Dr. Whicher about the possibility of taking a jaunt to Cornwall for a few days. No harm in it, said that worthy. It was a mild winter and might improve her nerves. Hearing Adam's report, Lelia winced. How could they know what was causing her distress? That every night she fought desperately for the life of this baby. For Adam's sake, she wanted it to be born; for Jared's sake, she did not, fearing it would part them. Nightly, she pleaded with her dead lover for mercy.

They took the old coaching route from Bideford, skipping the accustomed stops at Bude and Boscastle to go on straight to Tintagel. Entering Cornwall, the sensual richness of Devon gave way to an alien landscape of strange, wind-twisted trees and forlorn villages. Everywhere the odor of the sea permeated one's hair and clothes. They booked rooms at the Wharncliffe Arms, and spent the remainder of a peaceful day. Tomorrow they would devote to sightseeing.

The next day was magnificent. Their tourist party—Adam, Lelia, William, and his nanny—was the only one exploring. First, they went to see the remains of the Castle, known as "Dundagil by the Cornish sea," located on the mainland side of Tintagel Head. A grassy track, running from the valley, brought them gradually up the 270-foot incline to the ruins. Bewitched by the scenery, Lelia gazed out at an incredible expanse of

slate cliffs under a sky a shade less blue than the water. High overhead, seagulls dipped with shrill cries. Waves smashed through the bay, flinging themselves on a pebble beach. The others wanted to visit the fortified area on the island with a spectacular view of the coast. Assuring Adam that she would be perfectly all right by herself, Lelia headed back down the grassy slope toward the bay. Walking along, she could see them climbing the rude path to the Island's top. A rabbit hopped out of the grass and bolted off in search of his burrow. Birds rose from the ground in graceful arcs. What am I walking towards? she wondered idly. My destiny? Why not wait sensibly on the grass for them to return and pick a penny's worth of flowers? But her feet danced along. Down she went to the valley with its small bay and shingled beach. To her left was the cavern—some called it Merlin's cave. Rocks and pebbles packed the wet beach, beautiful as Aladdin's jewels; as she strolled over them they made a sound like marbles rolling together.

In a playful mood, Lelia entered the cavern, stepping now from rock to rock like a child—to stand spellbound under its vast arched ceiling. A rush of wind enveloped her like an embrace, and suddenly she knew what had forced her to return. Years before, after that fated visit to Richmond Hill, her parents had brought her to Tintagel. Finding her way, all alone, to this mystic cave, Lelia had plighted her troth in a quavering childish voice to the man who had seized her soul.

Now, as an adult, she repeated the words aloud, tears in her eyes. "Jared Stoner, I will love you all my life. Death will not separate us. We are one heart, one soul . . ."

And he answered her, his voice ringing in that enclosure. *Lelia Savage, you are my joy, my promise . . . I will love you throughout eternity.*

"For God's sake, why don't you take me?" she cried, and fell to her knees.

I don't want you with another man's child. I want you as you were. As you were . . .

Adam found her later standing on the shingled beach, staring numbly out to sea. One look and he sensed trouble.

"Lelia, what's the matter?" His voice rose anxiously. "Is it the baby?" To all appearances, she was deaf, lost in a stupor. "Is it the baby?" he loudly demanded.

Lelia looked at him as if at a stranger. "No, it's me."

"Can you get back to the inn or do you want me to send for help?"

"Nothing's wrong, dear," she said dully. "I must walk."

Reaching the Wharncliffe Arms, Lelia was confined to bed and given a sedative by the local physician, who pronounced her a victim of tourist fatigue. Unwilling to take any risk, Adam kept her in bed a further few days, before chancing the return trip to Devon.

Dr. Whicher attributed her "collapse" to the nervous complaints besieging a pregnant woman. Something might have startled her in the cave. A bat, a starfish—no more. She was absolutely fit, he stated.

When the time came, Lelia knew what to do. One week after their return, she was reading in her sitting room when the pains began. At some point, perhaps even before Tintagel, she had made her decision. A small part of her still wanted very much to give Adam his child; yet a larger part fought this idea. If she died in childbirth, still carrying Adam's child, she could never be reunited with Jared. So Lelia did nothing. Nothing but wait through the long day, until the cramps intensified to such an alarming degree that she was forced to send for Adam.

So severe was the pain, Lelia wondered if this was Jared's retaliation for what he considered the ultimate act of betrayal. When Dr. Whicher told her she had miscarried, she felt no deep sorrow, just an incredible relief that it was over at last.

Heavily sedated with laudanum, she heard Adam and Dr. Whicher having a discussion in their bedroom.

"Mr. Jeffrey, forgive my curiosity, but did your wife really want this child?"

"Oh, yes, Dr. Whicher, of course, she did." Adam sounded irritable and unconvinced. "What are you inferring?"

"Merely that she showed no emotion when I told her."

There was a long silence, then Adam said distinctly, "My wife is extremely self-possessed."

Are you happy now? Lelia asked her dead lover.

Yes, love, he replied, taking her in his arms. She fell asleep against his breast.

18.



WHEN Lelia was strong enough to sit up and converse, a haggard Adam sat down on the bed.

Reaching for his hand, she stiffened as he drew back. "Can you forgive me?" she asked shakily.

For a fraction of an instant, he hesitated, pain darkening his expression. "We knew it was a risk from the beginning, Lelia, but Whicher is most encouraging."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What does he say?"

"He says that as soon as you're well, there's no reason why we can't try again. That you ought to be able to have another baby."

"Another baby," she echoed, turning away from his glittering eyes that he might not see her despair.

"You do want another child, don't you, Lelia?" he asked, an edge to his husky voice.

"Of course, Adam. Of course . . ." Leaning against the mound of pillows, she faced him. "What did you learn about me in London?"

"You're in no condition to discuss that."

"What you learned has estranged us, hasn't it?"

He flushed and looked away. "The baby would have brought us together," he replied in anguish. "But you don't want my child, do you? It's Jared Stoner's child that you want!"

"He's dead, Adam. Don't torment me."

"Damn you! Have you no idea what you've done to me?" Rising from the bed, he moved tensely about the room.

"What have I done?" she whispered.

"Oh, when I married you I was under no illusion that you loved me, but I flattered myself that it would come in time. I didn't realize I had Stoner's ghost for a competitor." He glared at her, tears of rage and bitter hurt in his eyes. "Every time I lay with you, he lay between us. And each night you fell asleep in his arms."

The time for denial was long past. "What sent you to London—the dreams?" Lelia's voice was dull.

"Yes, my dear, you talk in your sleep, and things you said so distressed me that I went to see Kezia Stoner, in London, shortly before her death. This time I paid particular attention," he added harshly. "What I had dismissed as rubbish a year and a half ago, I now accepted as the truth." He ran a finger nervously up and down his cheek. "Of course, I ought to have realized the true situation the day I saw that extraordinary look on Jared's face. A man doesn't look that way at a woman unless he's mad about her. But the idea of your setting out deliberately to kill Jared Stoner baffled me—"

"What did Mrs. Stoner think?" she interrupted, her face very white.

"Oh, she was as much in the dark about why you would murder your lover as I was. She gave me some background information on your father's friendship with Tobias, and his suicide. Told me your mother died destitute. In her opinion you killed Margaret to marry Jared—"

"No! I never harmed her," Lelia burst out sharply.

"I agree, my dear." His smile was ironic. "Had I

not thought it an accident, I would never have supported you."

"You seem to have come to a dead end with Mrs. Stoner."

"I did and so I had to search elsewhere—" Pausing delicately, he studied her haunted eyes. "I'm sorry, Lelia. Investigators were hired to trace you from the time you left Devon to your misalliance with Lord Hunt. That, in turn, led to a prostitute's house, where the name Mrs. Marshall and straps had a significance."

"Did you find out what was done to me there?" Lelia asked, trembling with anger.

"I did."

Tears ran down her face. "And did you learn that my child was murdered?"

"That is what they say in Amberley, not what Lady Hunt's family says—including my ex-fiancée."

"They drowned him in the water-meadows," Lelia cried. "Only four years old."

Not listening, her husband continued, "I came back to Stoneham. William arrived . . . then your complete dossier came in November. All the gaps in your life filled in. The time spent as a high-priced whore in the West End, your disappearance to East London, your amour with Michael Houghton. All this I learned about my chaste wife—" He spat the words. "Was ever a man so deceived by a pretty face?" Controlling his temper with difficulty, he faced her. "I think I have the right to ask why you entered Richmond Hill to wreak vengeance on my dearest friend?"

"Doesn't the legacy of sorrow explain it?" Lelia muttered in agony. "Tobias Stoner ruined my parents, and that tragedy destroyed my life. Then my one hope—my little boy—was murdered. I had no trade to follow, and scant luck with the few respectable jobs coming my way. When I found myself penniless and starving, I resorted to prostitution. Perhaps Mrs. Marshall told you how I earned my money?" He nodded in disgust. "When I was ready, I took my revenge on the Stoners . . ."

A look of fascinated loathing appeared on his face. "And what did you do, my dear?"

She took a deep breath. "Wrecked your marriage plans for a start—"

"Did you now? Aren't you clever?" He smiled. "Though I always suspected you. The girl was much too stupid to have run away on her own. What else, darling? Did you kill Margaret?"

"You don't listen well, Adam," she replied, very coldly. "I said I never harmed her. I pitied the poor woman. She was too vulnerable. Besides, she was better off alive to me—" Her eyes flashed. "Dead, he could marry again and find a rich bride."

"Yes, I thought that, too. How did you get him to change his mind?"

"He loved me more than wealth," she said simply.

"What? Give up all that money for a whore?"

A glimmer of pride shone on her face. "He knew about my past, but it meant nothing to him. He loved me."

"Jared Stoner that much in love . . . Fancy! Then why did you kill him, sweet?" He sat beside her.

Her heart began to flutter. "I didn't kill him!" she cried. "Oh, that was my original intention when he raped me, but what began as abuse turned into love. One day I realized I was hopelessly involved with him. I destroyed some minor traps I'd laid, but the stairs . . . the stairs—"

"Yes, dear, what about the stairs?"

"For a long time I couldn't remember what I'd done. After he assaulted me, I was ill and lost my memory. That's what happened when my boy died. The day of his son's death, Jared and I were in the walled garden. Suddenly, I knew I was in love with him." Again, Lelia felt that overwhelming joy. "Returning to the house, I saw the tower and remembered. I went and fixed the stair." Her hands clenched and unclenched. "I know I fixed it, because I thought I'd never have the strength to tighten the bolt. But I finally did . . . I stood on it—"

"And is that when we encountered you in the hallway?" Adam asked curiously.

"Yes." She gazed at him in mortal terror. "Do you believe me? Do you think I fixed it?"

He shrugged. "In a dream, perhaps—you think you tightened it. But I saw it, Lelia. The bolt was loose."

"I thought you said it was an accident."

"Did I? Oh, yes, so I did." He smiled. "Well, that's the official opinion, and I saw no reason to contradict the police. Normal wear of such a mechanism is one thing and deliberate tampering another, but they were too stupid to understand what they were examining. However, I wasn't going to turn them on you. It seemed incredible at the time for you to have killed him. I wasn't certain in my own mind. It's just been in these last months that I concluded you were the only person who could have done it . . ." Glancing at the pitiful figure of his wife, his eyes grew reflective. "Women have such curious minds. How could you love Stoner when he so abused you?"

"You will jeer at me," Lelia answered sadly, "but I think we were destined for one another. Both of us sensed it, once we overcame our initial antagonism. Surely you—his dear friend—know that the brutal part of his nature was not the real man. Life had been good to neither of us. We drew together for mutual comfort and fell deeply in love. Our souls became one—"

"Then, God damn it, why did you marry me?" he shouted.

"And what would have happened to me if I'd refused you, Adam?" Lelia cried. "I couldn't have stayed on with your aunt. Not after you proposed. You'd been very good to me, looking after me, offering me a safety line in a rocky world. I liked you very much, and I thought I could make you happy. I tried to love you, Adam, I tried—" She was weeping now, "but I didn't know Jared had such a powerful hold over me . . ."

"Or that you wanted him so much as to lust for him in the daytime," he raged. "That's one thing I

absolutely can't forgive. That you married me, loving him so deeply." Embittered lines etched his handsome face. "I thought you chaste, and married a harlot. In addition, you are probably a killer as well."

"No, Adam, I swear to God—"

"Then who killed him?" he snapped.

"I don't know . . . I don't know!" she moaned hysterically. He let her cry until exhausted. Sick with dread, Lelia met his hard, unfeeling look, hoping for mercy—but none came. "What are we going to do?" she asked brokenly.

"Do?" Adam came to life. "Go on as before." His attitude was grim. "Survive like many another unhappy couple with skeletons in their closet." Anger glinted in the grey eyes. "Try and have another child."

Lelia flinched. Then, lonely and desperate, she begged him to stay. "Please, sleep with me tonight. Don't leave me, Adam—"

"No, I'm not sharing my bed with a dead man." His mouth curved derisively. "I'll come back when we're ready to make a baby." And he walked out.

That night in the room of the dream, Jared Stoner urged her to come to him without much delay. *I cannot rest until you lie beside me, my darling*, he murmured.

She touched his face. *Then help me, my love, because I don't know the way and I'm so frightened.*

No longer able to live with the burden of having caused Jared Stoner's death, and her husband's ruin, Lelia simply stopped eating. Whether or not Adam cared, she didn't know. He never visited her, but sat immersed in his study, brooding all day long. From the servants' gossip, Lelia learned that he was drinking quite heavily. She didn't doubt that he was mourning their loss—he wanted the child so much. But why did he grieve apart from his ailing wife? was the generally asked question in the household and town.

Dr. Whicher, never one to tolerate an uncooperative patient, proceeded to lecture Lelia one day. "Mrs. Jef-

frey, neither I nor any of my colleagues can find anything wrong with you physically. It's your despondent mood that must be broken." A faint show of interest spurred him on. "This apathy is bad both for you and your husband. If you make a normal recovery, I'm convinced you'll be pregnant again within the year. Indeed, so concerned is your husband about your welfare, that he's willing to take you abroad. A new, relaxing environment would do wonders for you."

Lelia glanced at him with irony.

"Now, won't you start eating again?" A pair of spaniel eyes peered earnestly into hers.

"What day of the month is it?" she asked wearily.

"March 26th." No response forthcoming, he added testily, "If you don't cooperate with me, Mrs. Jeffrey, I'll be forced to resort to a most unpleasant measure—"

A flicker of fear darted across her features.

"I think you know what I'm talking about. Your husband has just reluctantly given me his consent." Bending down, he politely threatened her. "Now, you wouldn't want to be force-fed, would you?"

Lelia's face went ashen, imagining the rubber tube being pushed down her throat, ramming its way into her stomach, causing excruciating pain. "And my husband gave his consent?"

"He has your best interests at heart."

"I'll eat," she replied with a cynical smile. "I wouldn't want to worry him."

"Good girl," said Dr. Whicher.

After consuming a hearty lunch, Lelia was rewarded with a visit from Adam, languidly elegant despite his obvious strain.

"I'm glad you finally decided to be sensible, Lelia. Force-feeding is a dreadful business. Sometimes it ruptures the internal organs and the patient dies." He ran a hand through his hair. "Now that you're on the mend, I'm off to Tavistock. I'll be away at least a week. There's a wage dispute in some of the mines. Damn fellows don't know when they're well off," he grumbled.

"Goodbye, my dear." And turning on his heel, he was out the door before she could say a word.

So they had cut her off from one death. Another existed, but there wasn't much time. Every day, she ate well to gain back her strength, and secretly took walks about her suite. She was wearing Jared's ruby heart again—its touch filling her with hope.

April arrived and Lelia was ready to set her plan in action. One morning she dressed and to her maid's astonishment, ordered a carriage. Thinking her mistress still quite frail, the woman tried to stop her. Not succeeding, she offered to come with her. But Lelia was adamant. It was just a short drive and she wanted to be alone.

Leaving Stoneham's great park, Lelia made the coachman drive first to Weare Giffard, where she renewed a laudanum prescription. The bottle in her purse was more than three-quarters full, but to be on the safe side, she went to Bideford and picked up two more bottles from different chemists. Bideford—home of her prosperous Savage ancestors, where they had loved and conquered. That entire line now ended in the dream-wrecked hopes of a golden-haired girl. How many years it had taken to understand her father's desperate craving for a son, and her mother's despairing heart. Well, now she was giving Adam Jeffrey a chance to have that son, though not quite as he had anticipated.

She made one last stop along the route at Westleigh. Early in their marriage, Adam had done Lelia a great kindness—bringing the bodies of David and her mother to this lovely churchyard. Now, amid tiny new flowers, she prayed for her lost loved ones, imploring their forgiveness for the act she was about to perform. Despondent . . . suicide while of unsound mind . . . She didn't doubt the verdict. Only Adam would know the truth, and in time would appreciate that she had done the best thing. If he could ever forgive her.

She asked the coachman to take her out to Wickford, and when Lelia alighted she urged him to go along the road for a bit until he came to The Pig and

Whistle. Pressing a few coins into his hand, she smiled and told him not to hurry but to have a few beers.

The gateman knew her. An old man, he had been in her father's service for years, and was thrilled when she had come home to Devon as a bride. Anytime she wanted to see the walled garden, and the family was away, which they were frequently, he gladly let her in. Hiding her exhaustion. Lelia pretended to give him a present for Easter, and emptied her purse of its coins. With a broad grin, he waved her on down the avenue. Bypassing the water-lilied moat, Lelia headed for the serpentine path and the park beyond. The small classical temple looked neglected and the folly a bit sad, but the lake shimmered in the light. Her heartbeat began to quicken as the grey buttressed walls overhung with moss and flowering creepers loomed in the distance. Nothing was changed, though it was perhaps a little wilder. The little spring flowers—crocuses, primroses, and violets—had appeared, and daffodils, iris, and hyacinth were rippling into bloom. None of the hollyhocks had opened, but miraculously she found a moss rose and tucked it into her bodice. All around her the flowering trees quivered with new life; the graveled paths glinted in the sun. Lelia found a stone bench and sank down, thinking that she might have stepped back in time.

The bottles of laudanum were heavy in her purse. How many hours had she dreamed away in this garden imagining that she would grow up and live happily ever after with her prince . . . Her prince. Jared Stoner.

Opening the purse, she took out the first bottle.

No, sweetheart, that's not the way. The bottle fell out of her hand and broke on the gravel, the liquid running into the stones.

Jared stood before her, radiant in his manhood.

Lelia burst into tears and he took her in his arms.

"What am I going to do?" she said, sobbing against his breast. "I don't know how to find my way back to you."

Taking her face in his hands, he caressed it. *Do you remember what happened to you in Hunstanton?*

"My heart?"

Yes, darling. I'll take you that way again. You've suffered enough, but you must come to me, Lelia.

"In a dream?"

No, come back to my grave. And he kissed her then, his mouth more real than any living man's. Their bodies pressed tight in a shared moment of ecstasy.

Don't make me wait too long, Lelia. I can't bear it, love . . .

She was alone in the garden.

There were three days until the anniversary of Jared Stoner's death. So little time to make preparations for this journey. The next day Leila said farewell to the two people whose love she cherished: Mrs. Cargill and William. Neither of them had an inkling that it was permanent. Cashmere mittens for her crippled hands, and a piece of handworked silk embroidery were Lelia's gifts to her old employer. She played a few favorite pieces from the piano repertoire, dashed off a watercolor of the garden, and then she fled without her usual embrace. She clasped William to her heart, and presented him with a miniature of herself, which made him giggle and stopped her tears—he would much have preferred a toy train.

Ruffling his wispy hair, Lelia said softly, "Look after your Uncle Adam . . ." And he grinned at her with a gap-toothed smile.

To Adam, she wrote a long and deeply affectionate letter, asking his forgiveness for the misery and deception of their marriage. And she begged him to marry again. Then she went and packed a small valise, and told the maid to call her very early the next morning and to have a carriage waiting as she was off to London.

That night, in the bedroom at Richmond Hill, Jared Stoner, raptly tender, asked Lelia if she had strength enough for this journey.

Yes, my darling. She was calm. I can take it but once in my life. I'm ready.

Don't be afraid, Lelia Savage. I'll protect you.

I love you, Jared Stoner. She cried, embracing him. I see your face in the sun, the moon, and the stars. I look for it in every passer-by, and I am bereft without you. Make our souls one again, my darling . . .

A great happiness shone on his face. Tomorrow night you will sleep with me forever, Lelia. But you must come to me.

Lelia left Devon without regret, feeling that she had never really returned. The trip to London was uneventful. Her one concern was excessive fatigue and a fear that she might collapse before reaching Ingoldisthorpe. It was foolish not to have brought her maid. The woman could help if she became ill. . . .

Jared Stoner's words, ringing in Lelia's ears as she awoke, haunted her. *You must come today, my darling, and alone. Otherwise, it will be too late . . .* If, by some awful mishap, she failed to reach him, did that mean the end of the dreams? Would they be lost to one another forever?

At Paddington Station, in a hurry to disembark, Lelia left behind the small picnic basket. Well, she thought, shrugging, I shall simply have to eat enroute to keep up my strength. Fortunately, there was a flask of sherry in her purse for emergencies. Remembering the young Devonshire girl who had stepped into this station years before, Lelia smiled gently at her enthrallment. She would do it all over again—walk through fire for such love. All that suffering was worth one kiss, one loving look from those black eyes.

The crowds parted and swirled about her: men, women, children, porters with racks of luggage, trainmen. Lelia walked along slowly, conserving her energy, heading for the carriage rank where she could catch a cab for Liverpool Street Station. Past the barrier, friends and relatives embraced. Cries of excitement reverberated under the massive cast-iron roof. And then

Lelia saw him waiting for her. Adam Jeffrey. At first she thought it the delusion of a sick woman. Beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead. She swayed. Hurrying through the crush, he clutched her to him, seizing the valise.

"Lelia, darling!" he said loudly, then whispered, "Where are you going?" Wild with fear, she attempted to break loose, but his grip tightened. "Where are you going, dear?" he repeated. "You look very ill. Let's sit down."

"No!" She shook her head. "No, there's not enough time. I must go."

Bending over her as might a lover, he again asked, "Where are you going?"

"I thought I'd spend a day or two in London," Lelia replied, fairly calm. "I might ask how you found me?"

"My servants were alarmed about you and contacted Dr. Whicher. Such frenzied activity after weeks of sedentary behavior seemed most bizarre. Whicher agreed that overexertion is dangerous for one in your state. He sent a wire informing me of your plans, and I was able to meet you here."

"Just a few days, Adam," she smiled, at her most charming. "Then I'll come back."

"Well, I'd like to stay with you. You're looking very peaked."

Finally she shook herself free. "I'm on the mend and you know it. You were thoughtful to come, dear. I'll see you in Devon." As she tried to walk past, he took her arm possessively.

"I shall scream if you don't let me alone."

"Try that if you wish," he snarled, "and I'll say you're under medical care for neurasthenia, and on your way to a nursing home." At her outraged glare, he continued, "You know what doctors think about dreams, don't you? Particularly erotic dreams? They are harbingers of madness." She sagged against him, and his voice softened: "For the moment, all you need is care. Nothing more serious than that."

Appalled, Lelia stared at him. "I could only be re-

leased on your orders, isn't that so?" He nodded gravely. "And if I weren't compliant . . . I might never get out?"

"Well, that usually applies to the asylums, Lelia. However—" He smiled tenderly. "I want an amiable, loving wife. And these dreams have really come between us, sweet."

"Just do one thing more for me, Adam, and then I'll do whatever you want." Lelia tried to keep the tremor out of her voice. "The guilt is destroying me. I must seek forgiveness . . ."

He paled. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm convinced that if I ask for absolution at his grave, he may forgive me for his murder." Hesitantly, she touched his cheek. "I must see Jared Stoner's grave."

"Must you?" he asked with brutal sarcasm.

"For God's sake, Adam, he was your dearest friend. Can't you forgive him?"

"For loving my wife too much?"

"Do just this one thing," Lelia pleaded. "Then I'll be at peace."

He fought with himself, then, against his better instincts, he helped his wife into a brougham. As for Lelia, she was faint with terror. At the first sign of weakness or irrationality, he would make good his promise and have her incarcerated. Surprisingly, Adam changed his tactics in the cab and began to make love to her, whispering endearments, pressing against her in a suggestive manner, and exhorting her to stay with him in London.

"Forget Norfolk and the dead, my love. Come with me," he murmured.

"Once I have his forgiveness, I'll be well." She gently kissed him. He wouldn't let go, his kiss increasing in fervor. A hand fondled her breasts, and Lelia deliberately encouraged him, loathing herself for this deceit, but knowing no other way to save herself.

"It will be the last trip, I promise you."

"Stay one night with me here," he breathed. "I want to make love to you——"

"Be patient, my dear, I'm still convalescent." Her smile was intimate. "If I go to Ingoldisthorpe, the dreams will end. Don't you want that?"

To that he had to agree and did, sitting back in a deep study until their arrival at Liverpool Street Station. There were just forty-five minutes to eat lunch before the train left. Despite Lelia's resolve, she couldn't touch a thing, fearing that he might slip medication into her food. Just how sympathetic can a wronged husband be with a deranged woman he believes to be a killer? She knew he would do anything to protect her from herself, and that meant stopping her by whatever means necessary. In some ways, he was remarkably astute. Perhaps he sensed that she was about to pull the cruelest trick of all on him.

Once on the train, in the comfort of their first-class carriage, the couple had little to say to one another as they sped through Suffolk. Reaching Norfolk, however, Adam Jeffrey became increasingly restive.

"A baby will get you over this hysteria," he snapped.

Lelia looked away from an endless vista of flat fields, whose horizon was broken only by an occasional hedge or windmill. Ominous clouds scuttled across the sky, alarming spring into a retreat.

"I don't share Whicher's opinion that I can have another child," she wearily replied.

"Well, you seem to have no problem conceiving." A contemptuous note in his voice startled her. "Didn't you know you were pregnant when you left Richmond Hill?"

Lelia shook her head, asking faintly, "What happened?"

"You lost it when you were so ill in Hunstanton. I told the doctor your husband was at sea, and that I—your 'cousin'—would write him the distressing news." A glint of malice shone in his eyes. "What do you think of that?" he asked coldly. "Jared's baby!"

Tears blurred Lelia's eyes. So she had been right after all. "Why did you never tell me?"

"What would have been the good of it? Bastards are best disposed of . . ." At her continued silence, he sneered, "Aren't you going to shed a few tears?"

She forced a smile. "No, I'm happy to have carried it—even for such a short time. I prayed for that . . ."

Defeated, he turned to the window. Lelia closed her eyes and dreamed of Jared Stoner and their love child.

Moments later, Adam sat beside her, his voice low and hurried. "I beg of you, Lelia, don't go. I need you. I'm frightened for you if you step into that churchyard."

With a sigh, she touched his hand. "Shall I tell you about that last day?"

He recoiled slightly. "If you wish."

And so Lelia told her husband about their anguished fight and reconciliation; how Jared had asked her to marry him—sealing their troth by placing his signet ring on her finger—and how he had left her sleeping to bring her the family jewels.

"So that's why he broke his engagement," Adam said ruefully. "A proposal of marriage. Couldn't you have told me that before?"

"I was afraid to tell you. Afraid that you would make me go to the police—" Her voice broke. "I killed him, didn't I?"

"No, my dear, you didn't kill him." Adam's face was deathly pale. "I did."

Lelia stared at him in horror.

"But it wasn't meant for him," he cried in agony. "God, I never meant to kill him. If you've suffered, Lelia, just think how I've lived in torment day after day."

"I . . . don't . . . understand!"

To her alarm, he began to weep like one damned, shielding his face with his hand. Finally, gaining control of his emotions, he whispered, "You must first understand what I felt for him. I loved Jared Stoner as deeply as you. It was a different kind of love, but one no less powerful. Years ago, he saved my life at Eton.

I was a frail, undersized lad—the kind the bullies relish tormenting. On my first day, a group of these toughs waylaid me and began to toss me in a blanket. Stoner rescued me from this dangerous game. He was a few years older; big for his age. Everyone stood in awe of him—the boys, teachers—even the headmaster thought twice about crossing him. Well, he took me under his wing and I fagged for him—cleaning his chambers, cooking his food—and in return he gave me his protection. No one ever roughed me up again; nor was I even birched. But Stoner was considerate; he didn't turn me into a sexual workhorse as so many of his compatriots were doing with their fags. If he wanted somebody, a village whore was sufficient."

Distaste curved his fine mouth. "I loved him as my dearest friend. He was the most beautiful young man I have ever seen, with the face and body of a Greek god. An astonishing kind of beauty which leaves the beholder bewitched. You have it, my dear." And he gave his wife a piercing glance. "You—his female counterpart." With a handkerchief, he wiped his tear-stained face. "But how can you know what I'm talking about? You spent but a fraction of your life with him. I spent years. Years of devotion. We made a good pair at Cambridge. With his strength and beauty, and my money and intelligence we were a formidable couple. Those were the happiest days of my life." He moved abruptly away to the seat opposite.

"Tragic how one mistake can ruin a life. Jared's marriage was a disaster. In a few weeks, he knew he'd made a deadly error, but instead of devoting his energies to the Law, he sapped them in the demimonde, forever seeking a new excitement to drown his unhappiness. That was the period of the great drinking bouts, the reckless gambling, and the marathon round of brothels." Adam's laugh was cynical. "But my poor friend, who acted the blackguard, was in reality the romantic, in quest of a woman who would give him undying love. And all his bedmates wanted was a wild romp with a handsome devil. Frustration made him

cruel in his affairs, to the point that when he met you, I was convinced he had no heart left. Therefore, I never took you seriously enough. But you must understand one thing, Lelia—" Leaning forward, he addressed her earnestly. "I was everything to him—friend, confessor—until you came along."

"When did you begin to question us?" she asked shakily.

"Not for a long time. You see in the beginning, he paid no attention to you whatsoever—which in itself was strange. You were a beautiful woman under his roof whom he steadfastly ignored. Any other woman, who caught his eye, he would have bedded in two seconds flat. What I didn't realize, of course, is that you were already intimate. But if his behavior was odd, so was yours. When Daphne eloped with Frederic Stiller, I thought you'd had a hand in it, but Stoner dropped this promising lead after checking everybody else out thoroughly."

"But you stopped him—" Lelia said, bewildered.

"True, I did, because I sensed he was very uneasy about you, and I couldn't decide if he was shielding you or just didn't want to know. For friendship's sake, I let it rest. He never picked it up again . . . Then you lied to me, Lelia," he complained, "telling me you were not from Devon. Some weeks later, Jared confessed that you were indeed Savage's daughter, and he was keeping you on because you were indigent and amused him. His 'passing fancy,' he called you." Adam sniffed. "Your lie baffled me until that remarkable moment when we met outside the closed wing. Guilt all over your face, and Jared with such a look as I'd never seen before. Now why should you trespass in that area? I asked myself, walking through it later. The only thing of significance to possibly interest a young woman was the tower where the jewels were kept—"

Lelia started.

"Oh, yes, I knew all about them. When we were still at Eton, Jared showed me the stairs' secret and the treasure beyond. Out of curiosity, that night, I tested

the stair, stood ■■■ it with both feet. You'd fixed it, darling, just as you'd said. It was tight as a drum."

Lelia leaned against the window, sick at heart.

"Seeing you together, and mulling it over afterward, I came to the conclusion that Stoner was infatuated, and that you coveted the Stoner jewels. Why else would such a beautiful woman deliberately bury herself at Richmond Hill? Certainly not for love of Jared Stoner!" He stretched out his legs and turned a vacant gaze on the passing scenery.

"Stoner was my main concern. Despite the Daphne fiasco, we were very close, and I knew his financial situation was perilous. The one thing holding him back was Margaret. Amazing how addicts can have such astonishing good health! These people are a terrible drain. Contributing nothing, they drag everyone down with them. Such was the case with Margaret." With a thin laugh, his grey eyes darkened. "I simply gave her a push in the right direction."

She gaped at him. "You were the one bringing her laudanum?"

"Of course, sweet. She was such a millstone. Why do you think we were such good friends? This woman who couldn't stand anybody else? Because I always brought her a remembrance, which she would squirrel away for emergencies. A trip to the chemists would be followed by lunch in Hunstanton or Lynn. And she would hide my gift in one of those secret cubby holes, or slip it into the lining of that gorgeous brocaded dress—so heavy that she never wore it." He patted her knee. "Bet you never thought of that place, eh?" Ignoring her distraught cry, he added lightly, "After the boy's death, when Jared and I were in London, I asked him pointblank if he was still sleeping with you, but he denied it. Said he'd picked up a girl in King's Lynn. I believed him . . . Yet when Margaret died, he acted as if he couldn't stand me—I, who had always done so much for him," he raged. "And we had a serious quarrel—"

Her look was wary. "About what?"

"His future. With Margaret dead, I told him that he was now in a position to make a very wealthy match. The woman was an heiress, and although no beauty, would fill his coffers with enough gold to restore Richmond Hill to all its glory. We both knew the family and I said I'd be delighted to act as matchmaker. Well, he refused to discuss it any further. Said a bereaved widower shouldn't talk about such things. Rubbish! He detested Margaret as much as she did him. Foolishly, I put it down to a temporary aberration, and decided to wait until a more propitious time."

Lines of sadness marked his face. "Christmas came. We had a wonderful evening reminiscing—the whole week went splendidly. No mention of matrimony on my part, and then I walked with a lovely young woman in a garden. Do you remember?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"He came out and shouted at you, furious at your absence, and you flew to him with a look of giddy radiance. I took him to lunch and dared him to deny that you were still not his mistress. But he stood his ground, insisting that the affair was long dead—another woman had utterly captivated him. Raising the marriage issue, I said that never again would he get such a chance, and that no dollymop was worth Richmond Hill. That really enraged him," he said acidly. "All afternoon, all evening we talked—I pleaded my case, Jared growing steadily more drunk and morose by the hour. But both of us were getting very drunk." He laughed sarcastically. "Imagine my astonishment, Lelia, and my deep hurt when he threw me out of Richmond Hill. Told me quite bluntly to get the hell out on New Year's Day!"

Coolly appraising her, his eyes narrowed. "The pity of it is that he continued to protect you. Had he been more honest about your affair, how different things might have been . . . All I saw was a man hopelessly enamoured of a beautiful woman, whom I suspected to be an adventuress."

"I don't understand," Lelia moaned. "How could you kill a man that you loved so much?"

A bitter smile lit his face. "It was meant for you, Lelia."

His voice cut like a knife over her outcry. "You know I always get in trouble when I drink too much. That night, sick with grief and anger, I went back to the tower, thinking about you and your damnable beauty. Thinking about how you were destroying Jared's one chance of happiness. He had no reason to set foot in the place except to get the jewels for an impending marriage, and I knew that would be months away—if it ever took place. But you were a different matter." He grimaced. "The Lelia Savage I had met as a girl in Devon would be incapable of such a thing, but the woman had a wild and desperate air, and I felt you fully capable of stealing those jewels. So I fixed the stairs for you. You were the one to plunge to your death," he cried brutally. "How was I to know that he would come to London and, desperate, agree to a match which broke his heart. And then when his great love threatened to leave him, he wooed and won her . . . and went to his death—"

"Oh, God, stop!" Sobbing with abandon, again and again Lelia saw that awful fall. Across the aisle, her husband watched her with grim interest. "You must have loathed me," she muttered. "Why were you so good to me afterward?"

He shrugged. "Pity. You were alone and destitute; then you became so ill and lost his child. I had the feeling that I might . . . expiate . . . my crime by taking care of you, but for a long while hatred battled with compassion. I held you responsible—you gave me the idea—for killing the one person I loved—" His anguished voice broke.

Lelia stared at him as she might a poisonous reptile. "Did you rape me in London?"

"Tried to, my dear, but couldn't. Everything was planned. You had the energy to get to Devon, but I sidetracked you and overdosed you—" Pausing, he

glanced at his trembling hands. "It was the most extraordinary thing, standing by your bedside, wanting you so much. Yet I couldn't touch you. It was as if an invisible barrier were parting us—as if Jared himself was protecting you. All night I kept watch by you, and during those long hours I began to fall in love with you. Later, in Devon, you eclipsed all other women, and I knew that I had to marry you." Impulsively, he came and embraced her. "We have both sinned, darling, but everything will be fine once we have a child."

"You want a harlot's baby?" Lelia asked scornfully.

"Yes. He would have wanted it. I want what Jared had."

"What if I go to the police?" She made herself face him.

A look of wry amusement met her. "They wouldn't believe you, Lelia. You would have been their prime suspect, only it was so obviously an accident. Should you be so foolish as to confide in them—" He subjected her to a long scrutiny. "I'll tell them you're deranged, that you suffer from delusions, and that I'm confining you to an asylum—"

Wrenching away her arm, Lelia stood up just as the train skidded to a halt in Hunstanton. The sharp movement threw her against the window, giving her a bad blow on the forehead. For a moment, she blacked out, regaining consciousness with her head on Adam's shoulder.

"Drink this, darling, you'll feel better."

A flask swam before her. "Is it mine?" she asked, stunned.

"Yes, sweet, your flask. Take a good drink, Lelia."

One large swallow and she knew her mistake. "For God's sake, what did you put in it?" she cried fearfully.

"Just a sedative to relax you, Lelia." His lips brushed her temple. "I'm going to leave you a moment and hire a cab. Put your head back against the cushion . . ." He floated out of sight.

Weak with hunger, Lelia felt the swift narcotic action of the sedative seeping into her arms and legs,

numbing her brain. Through blurred vision, she made out a cab rank. There was no sign of Adam. On her feet, she swayed and headed for the door. Everything became a challenge. The simple task of opening the door proved formidable. But somehow she did it—then down the steps to the platform . . . and straight on to the rank. By a miracle, Adam Jeffrey was elsewhere, talking to a porter about his luggage.

"Take me to Ingoldisthorpe," Lelia weakly implored a driver. "And quickly . . . quickly. It's a matter of life and death!" Hauling herself aboard, she peered out the rear window in time to see Adam snatch up his luggage and race for the next cab.

Fortunately, she had a good driver who took her at her word. They tore along that bumpy road as if all the hounds of hell were let loose behind them. Tossed back and forth in the small confines of the carriage, Lelia fought the sedative with every ounce of strength she possessed. First, she tried mental games to keep awake; then she studied the surrounding countryside still visible in the twilight. When she fainted, she realized more serious measures had to be taken. Out came the hat pin and she jabbed herself repeatedly, the sharp pain keeping her awake. Off came the hat, she let down her hair and unbuttoned her fur coat, ready to make a dash for it when they reached the church. Touching Jared's ruby heart, Lelia felt it burning against her breast. When she dropped off to sleep it seared her, waking her up. Her arms and legs were almost paralyzed; she was incapable of speech. Only with the greatest difficulty could she move. Tears of frustration ran down her cheeks. How could she come so close and then lose him because of this diabolical trick of Adam's?

They were slowing down. Outside, she could see the churchyard. "Here!" Lelia mumbled. Opening the door, she steadied herself. And as the carriage drew to a halt, she slid to the ground, tossed the cabbie her purse, and staggered in frantic haste toward the churchyard gate. How long the hedge was . . . endless . . . endless. Grasping at the hawthorn for support, she

ripped her hands. She must escape those footsteps following her.

Adam caught up with her just as she was nearing the gate.

"You're having a nightmare, darling. You're coming with me," he said, taking a tight grip on her arms.

Trying to speak, Lelia couldn't. The drug was too powerful. She swayed against him. They were in an alley of yew trees—just a few more feet and she would reach the gate, and once inside. . . .

"Let me rest," she sighed, words slurring together. "Against the gate."

"Better to ride back to Hunstanton, Lelia."

"I need air, Adam . . . just a few minutes . . ."

He walked her over to the gate, and Lelia clutched it in a wave of dizziness. Night was fast approaching. Could she find her way in the dark? Dear God, she didn't even know where he was buried.

"Won't you let me go, Adam? A half-hour is all I ask."

"No, dear," he said coldly. "No more specter chasing."

"This potion is making me feel so ill," Lelia whispered, which was not far from the truth. "Please . . . let me rest alone for a moment. My head is reeling . . ."

Mercifully, he released her, and Lelia felt for the latch with numbed fingers. One touch and her hand swung the gate open with new strength. She slammed it shut between them. Adam stared at her in disbelief, then lunged for her arm and stopped. Appalled.

"My God!" he cried. "He's stopping me. Lelia! Don't go to him. I beseech you. Don't go to him! I love you!" He broke into tears.

"You took him from me," Lelia replied softly. "All I ask is a half-hour. You owe me that much—"

"But I love you!" he implored. "No matter what's passed between us, you are my wife and I love you!"

"And you were good to me, Adam. But it's Jared Stoner I love, and I have no heart left for you, my dear." She reached through the gate and touched his

arm gently. "Give me this time with him, and you'll find peace." Lelia took a step backward. "Try to forgive us, Adam." Turning away, she walked down the path, leaving him weeping by the gate.

High overhead, a heavy mass of clouds drifted apart, exposing a brilliant moon and a night full of stars. Flowers twinkled at her feet, shimmering in the moonlight. It was strange but she knew exactly what to look for. The shape of the headstone . . . its location . . . the lettering. She had seen it only once before, dreaming in Hunstanton. It seemed a long walk, but might only have been a minute, and then she found it. With a stifled sob, Lelia embraced the stone, sinking to her knees. In an instant he was beside her—Jared Stoner—smiling in triumph, gathering her to his heart. With passionate abandon did he kiss her on his grave, and then he whispered:

Lelia, my bride, my darling! Now I can take you and you shall sleep in my arms throughout eternity.

Picking her up in his strong arms, he carried her into his bedroom at Richmond Hill.

"Will it hurt?" Lelia asked.

No, my love, just a pressure on your heart as we make love. Then it will all be over. I've waited for you so long, darling.

Stretched out on his bed, Lelia held out her arms to him and he came eagerly like a bridegroom. As their spirits rose in ecstasy, she felt the hard pressure at her heart, a fierce, intense pain leaving her breathless.

Don't be frightened! he cried, his mouth avidly seeking hers.

The kiss burned like fire as the pain in Lelia's heart broke, and she felt his arms tighten about her as their bodies became one.

Sleep, my beloved wife, he murmured, and she fell against his chest.

Epilogue



I WAITED outside the churchyard for a half-hour, as Lelia had requested. Then, in a state of terror, I was able to step inside. It was a long walk to Stoner's grave, made even more difficult by a feeble light from the night sky. When I finally reached the plot, I found her. Dead. Lying on Jared Stoner's grave, a look of such rapture on her face as I'd never seen in our life together. Her beautiful hair spilled across the ground like a shower of gold. Resting sideways, her outstretched hands reached for someone.

I knelt beside her and wept. Although I had feared this outcome, I still had doubted his power and her love. That she would willingly take such a step seemed incredible. But she was quite dead.

Heartsick, I sent the coachman for a doctor, remaining by her body, holding her still warm hand. When the physician arrived—not Dr. Perrin but his colleague, Peters—a temporary diagnosis was made: death due to heart failure. She was prone to such seizures, I told him, and had recently suffered a miscarriage. As a formality, Peters took her body away, informing me that I could claim it the next morning along with the death certificate. Then, formal arrangements could be made for her burial.

Later that night, I went back to Stoner's grave and raged at him, pouring out all my grief and remorse; weeping for my dead wife, whom I truly loved, and for my dearest friend, whom I had so wantonly killed. I cursed him for his beauty, which had so ensnared me

years before, I beseeched him to tell me what to do. To end the agony. Many painful hours later, I left with a plan.

Early the next morning, Lelia's body was released to me, and I obtained permission to have her interred at Ingoldisthorpe. After purchasing a plot, I saw her removed to the sexton's shed, where she was placed in an oak coffin to await burial. Because I had no home nearby and no place to take her, she was left like a pauper—a step I found repugnant, but one which was necessary to my purpose. I then hired a carriage to take me to Sedgeford, to visit an old schoolmate of Jared's and mine—one Tom Bailey, a clergyman.

Genial and kind as ever, Tom Bailey expressed delight at seeing me, and distress over my tragic loss. Undoubtedly, I further shocked him with my extraordinary request.

"Tom—" I faltered. "I need your help in a very delicate matter." Up went an eyebrow, but he smiled encouragement. "I want to bury Lelia in Ingoldisthorpe."

"That's no problem, surely?"

"In one respect, yes. I want to bury her with someone."

Clearly he thought me dazed with sorrow, because his mouth went slack with astonishment.

"With Jared Stoner."

"Good Lord, Jeffrey! What are you thinking of?"

Tears welled in my eyes. "Rightfully, she belongs to Stoner. They were going to marry, but he died in that awful fall. My wife never got over it. Despair killed her. This is the only way I know of giving her the peace she so desperately craved."

"Can't you bury her near him?"

Vehemently, I shook my head. "No! No, I don't want them separated by even a few feet. They must be joined in death as they were not in life."

His face was very pale. "You realize how unorthodox this is?"

"Very. That's why I'm asking your help." But it took

a great deal of persuading. In the end Tom Bailey agreed to help me, fortunately before I broke down and confessed my own culpability. Saved that shame, I rewarded him with a sufficiently large check to keep his parsonage in good order for years to come. Assisting us in this task would be Bailey's coachman—a man, I was informed, who would hold his tongue.

That evening we drove back to Ingoldisthorpe and the churchyard, quietly, though my hands were damp with perspiration. Parking the carriage some distance down the road, we entered the gate and using a small lantern found our way to the shed. Inside was Lelia's coffin.

"I want to take her out," I explained.

With Tom Bailey following, the coachman and I carried her frail body up the hill to Jared Stoner's grave. I laid her down gently, then took off my coat. The three of us set to work with our shovels, and within a half-hour had reached the coffin. As I had surmised, it was a very large one. At this point my courage almost failed. Bailey was whispering snatches of prayer; his man uttered an imprecation.

Fear tugged at my stomach. "Help me open it," I cried.

Sick with dread, I forced myself to look at the body of my friend, and what I saw astonished me. *There was absolutely no change from the man I saw buried two years ago.* His skin was as fresh as any living man's. Jared Stoner, like one asleep, lay waiting for his beloved Lelia. Dry-eyed, but deeply moved, I lowered my wife into the coffin, and as I laid her against his body, his arms seemed to enfold her in an embrace, his head bent to hers. Taking the rings from my darling's hand—her wedding rings—I slipped Jared Stoner's signet ring on her finger and placed that hand in his. Her hair covered him like a golden mantle, and the beautiful mouth curved in a loving smile.

One last thing I did. Against her breast, I laid a small rose plucked from the churchyard path. Against the broken heart, now healed.

I signaled for the coffin to be closed. In a hushed voice, Tom Bailey read the burial service over them, as I stood by fighting my anguish. A handful of earth thrown over their bridal bed, and we buried the coffin.

Lelia Jeffrey was buried officially the next morning, with a mourning husband standing grim and white-faced over a coffin containing dirt and stones, while his wife slept peacefully in her beloved's embrace some distance away.

Naturally, my family was astounded that I should bury Lelia so far from Devon and from her own kin in Westleigh. My next move baffled them even more. I bought Richmond Hill—handsomely enriching Stoner's young son—and then refurbished it as my dear friend had always dreamed of doing. Now it is considered one of the glories of the county. I had a few rooms permanently sealed: his suite and her enchanting room. No one will ever sleep there again. The tower has been bricked up. If I had my way, I would burn the damn thing to the ground. The mere thought of it sends me into the most profound melancholy.

Strange that in death I should so miss her—I who made her life a torment, who constantly baited her for my own grievous sin. Ironically, freedom brought me no desire to marry again. The thought of touching any woman after Lelia fills me with repugnance. Indeed, I go no more to the brothels, and my friend from Tavistock has long since gone her way. I am content with Lelia's golden memory, and accept this as my just punishment.

I spend much time in the churchyard, keeping watch by their headstone.

JARED STONER
1848–1887
and his beloved LELIA

Amazingly, nobody has commented on the inscription, but the Stoners were largely ignored in Ingoldis-

thorpe in their lifetime. It comforts me to know that she does not lie alone, but in the arms of her great love.

The grave is my main concern. A provision in my will states that it must be well tended. This burden I have placed upon my adopted son and heir, William.

Jared and Lelia. Endlessly, I say their names. I hope they have forgiven me. Sometimes I see shadows in the walled garden, where no shadows ought to be; or I hear laughter from the sealed rooms, where once their love flared so violently. And I pray for their happiness. Perhaps she understands, or the rose would never have bloomed on the grave. A *moss rose*—not the common variety I gave her—but the flower he laid against her breast like a child. A moss rose blooming where none ever bloomed before. People, walking by, marvel at its beauty. I like to think it grows from her heart in gratitude.

Jared and Lelia. . . .